Engineering your own soul: theory and practice in communist biography and autobiography

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Communism: a love story

An exegesis and creative project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that:

• except where due acknowledgement is made, the work is mine alone;

• the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award;

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Signed ___________________________ Jeff Sparrow, January 2007
Abstract

The creative project *Communism: a love story* is a piece of literary non-fiction: a biography of the communist intellectual Guido Carlo Luigi Baracchi (1887-1975). It investigates Baracchi’s privileged childhood as the son of the government astronomer and a wealthy heiress, his career as a university activist, his immersion in Melbourne’s radical and artistic milieu during the First World War, his role in the formation of the Communist Party of Australia, his changing attitudes to communism during the 1920s and 1930s while in Australia and overseas and his eventual identification with the Trotskyist movement. The project explores the different strands of thought within Australian communism, the impact of Stalinisation on the movement both in Australia and overseas, and the personal and political difficulties confronting anti-Stalinist radicals. It examines the tensions between Baracchi’s political commitments and his upbringing, and situates Baracchi’s tumultuous romantic relationships (with Katharine Susannah Prichard, Lesbia Harford, Betty Roland and others) in the context of his times and political beliefs.

The exegesis *Engineering your own soul: theory and practice in communist biography and autobiography* examines the political and artistic tensions within the biographical and autobiographical writings of Betty Roland and Katharine Susannah Prichard in the context of the development of the world communist movement.
Volume One – Exegesis

Engineering your own soul: theory and practice in communist biography and autobiography
Research question:

How were biography and autobiography theorised and practised within the Australian communist tradition?

Subsidiary questions:

1) How were biography and autobiography theorised and practised by Katharine Susannah Prichard?

2) How were biography and autobiography theorised and practised by Betty Roland?
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Introduction

The challenge posed by the communist literary tradition to conventional modes of reading and writing is generally acknowledged. Communism generated particular textual forms, models of authorship, structures of literary production and distribution: a distinctive culture of reading and writing parallel with, and sometimes in opposition to, the literary mainstream.¹

Yet, even as a considerable body of research has accrued on the literature, poetry and drama of the Australian communist movement, its biographies and autobiographies have (with some exceptions)² been treated more seriously as historical sources than as literary texts. In part, this emphasis reflects a more general undertheorisation of biography and autobiography as literary forms. Historically, as Ian Donaldson points out, the contemporary rise of biography (both in terms of technical sophistication and commercial success) corresponded with the critical acceptance of the ‘death of the author’ so that:

theory and practice [were] starkly at odds … : theorists have not diminished the powerful attraction of biography as a genre, while biographers have tended to carry on with the job as though there were no theoretical case to answer, no need to examine the status and function of their work and its complex potential relationship to the concerns of criticism and interpretation.³

The neglect of Australian communist biography and autobiography also relates to a specific problem for communists: an underlying unease about the validity of life-writing. The proliferation of hagiographies of party leaders and other important communist figures (generally intended for a mass readership in the Soviet bloc) did

not altogether negate an underlying theoretical suspicion by communist intellectuals
of biography as inherently individualist, unmaterialist and non-Marxist.  

The Australian communist movement’s reluctance to explicitly theorise
biography and autobiography (compared to, for example, the seriousness with which
it treated the novel) has obscured the extent to which communism did, in practice,
develop the genres in distinctive and interesting fashions. It might even be argued that
a certain kind of autobiographical narrative helped establish the communist movement
in Australia, as elsewhere, since in the aftermath of the Russian revolution, the
foundation of a local communist organisation was spurred not only by the writings
and exhortations of the Bolshevik leaders but also by the accounts of non-Russian
witnesses to the revolution and, later, by travellers intent on seeing the Soviet Union
for themselves. The narratives about travel to Soviet Russia were inevitably also texts
about the people who did the travelling: thus, from its earliest days, communism was
explained, propagated and justified in Australia through memoir and autobiography.  

The form and the autobiographical content of these travel narratives changed
as the Soviet Union developed. In particular, its turn to economic and cultural autarky
after 1928 – expressed theoretically by the Stalinist slogan of ‘socialism in one
country’ – generated what might be dubbed ‘Stalinist travel narratives’, texts that
blend a narrowly circumscribed form of autobiography with the distinctive tradition
of literary utopianism.

During the same period, the Stalinist regime’s much more systematic assertion
of control over literary production found expression in the Zhdanovite theory of
socialist realism. Zhdanovism remained a crucial referent for communist novelists,
poets and dramatists until the end of the Soviet period. Though rarely explicitly
applied to biography and autobiography, it nonetheless shaped the texts of communist
writers working in these genres.

The works of Katharine Susannah Prichard and Betty Roland provide a useful
focus for an examination of the theory and practice of Australian communist

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4 On Soviet biography, see Clark, K. The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual, University of Chicago Press,
Chicago, 1981, p. 122-3; on theoretical attitudes to biography, see Robinson, G. 'Biography and the
5 See, for instance, Ross, E. The Russian Revolution: Its Impact on Australia, Socialist Party of
Australia, Sydney, 1972, especially p. 20.
6 The terminology of Stalinist literary production is notoriously imprecise. ‘Zhdanovism’ is used here
to refer to the broad attitudes to literature associated after 1934 with the name of central committee
secretary Andrei Zhdanov, while ‘socialist realism’ is employed more specifically, usually in
circumstances where writers and critics use the term themselves.
biography and autobiography. Both produced several books within these genres; together, their careers extended from the beginning of the communist period through to its very end. Prichard celebrated the Russian revolution in 1917 and joined the Communist Party of Australia at its inception in 1920; Roland published the second edition of *Caviar for Breakfast* in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall came down. In certain respects, they provide a representative sample of broader tendencies within communist biography and autobiography.

In 1934, Prichard and Roland briefly shared a flat in Moscow with the communist intellectual and activist Guido Baracchi. The visit – at the height of the Stalinist era and just as socialist realism was being constructed – was a defining event in the personal and political development of both women, and remained thereafter central to their writing careers. The memoirs they wrote of their Soviet experiences, Prichard’s *The Real Russia* and Roland’s *Caviar for Breakfast*, prefigured and in various ways influenced their later, more conventionally autobiographical, writing.7

Prichard’s *The Real Russia* is a paradigmatic Stalinist travel narrative, illustrating the autobiographical peculiarities characteristic of the genre. Her two later volumes of autobiography – *Why I Am a Communist* in 1956 and *Child of the Hurricane* in 1963 – display the contradictory and ultimately self-defeating effects of Zhdanovism on Australian communist autobiography.

Roland’s *Caviar for Breakfast* is based on material gathered in 1934 but was first published in 1979, an entirely different political era. In some respects, *Caviar for Breakfast* – and Roland’s subsequent autobiographical corpus – seeks to provide a critique of the Australian communist experience. This critique is, however, contradictory, and implicitly accepts some of the key theoretical assumptions developed during the Stalinist era.

A comparative reading of the theory and practice of biography and autobiography in the work of Betty Roland and Katharine Susannah Prichard reveals the significance of the historical and textual legacy of Stalinism in the literary productions of the Australian communist tradition.

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The genre of Stalinist travel narratives

*The Real Russia* has been read as a text both documenting and exemplifying a particular mode: the Zhdanovite theory of socialist realism. As Drusilla Modjeska puts it, *'The Real Russia is significant for the introduction of these ideas [i.e. socialist realism] to Australia by a prominent writer and for their impact on her own work.'*

It is true that the text arose out of a trip facilitated by the organisers of the First Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934, the event at which Karl Radek, Maxim Gorky, Andrei Zhdanov and others first presented the theory of socialist realism to the world. Though Prichard did not attend the congress, for most of her time in the Soviet Union she accompanied a delegation of visiting writers:

> We were four foreign writers who had been invited to visit the Kuznetsk Steel Plant. Walt Carmon, a brilliant, cynical American journalist; Sigvad Lund, a Danish writer, blonde and powerful; Helios Gomez, a Spanish artist and poet, as handsome as Valentino; and Scherer, our interpreter, a Russian but not a communist.

The argument made by Modjeska – and, after her, by Cath Ellis – that Prichard consciously constructed *The Real Russia* through socialist realist techniques is, however, misleading.

Ellis’ more detailed reading focuses on Prichard’s chapter about the party purges of 1933. *The Real Russia* presents the purges as an overwhelmingly positive experience. Prichard describes the testimony of the good party member Comrade Marya Seroshtanova (‘an elderly woman, grey and weather beaten’) alongside that of Olya Smirnova, a less conscientious individual who ‘neglects her political classes … and turns away from the workers who look to her for help and guidance,’ before concluding that the purge process is ‘as dramatic as a play in the Realistic Theatre … [with] the atmosphere of a folk drama and of justice in its simplest form.’

In these descriptions, Ellis identifies the conscious application of key elements of socialist realism:

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9 Prichard *The Real Russia*, p. 79.
10 Prichard, p. 163.
The element of *klassovost*, or the expression of the characteristics of class in art, is prevalent when repeated claims of serving, or failing to serve, the proletariat in the work environment are presented. *Partiinost*, or the expression of party spirit in accordance with the objectives and methods of the communist party is, of course, inherent in the overall structure of the chapter, for the party is presented as being an organised, fair, vigilant and democratic organisation. *Narodnost*, or the expression of a typical national style, is utilised in the presentation of the stories, with names, ages, occupations and locations, giving a local or typical tone to them. Each of the stories has an ending which is positive in terms of the working people and their party. And each person is measured against the ideal or perfect worker – the socialist hero.\(^{11}\)

The difficulty with this account is that, thus defined, *klassovost*, *partiinost* and *narodnost* are so nebulous and so vague that Ellis could equally have located them in, say, Prichard’s *Working Bullocks*. That book also presents the Communist Party as a ‘fair, vigilant and democratic organisation’; it too features a socialist hero, typical characters and so on – yet it was written in 1926, many years before the formulation of socialist realism.

The relationship between *The Real Russia* and socialist realism is thus more complicated than Ellis suggests. While *The Real Russia* derives from the historical conditions that also produced socialist realism, it is misleading to read the text as a conscious application of a socialist realist aesthetic. The book is better understood as an example of a different but related genre: the Stalinist travel narrative. This chapter, therefore, will delineate the generic limits of such narratives, as a prelude to a detailed examination of Prichard’s autobiographical writing.

John McNair identifies both Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *The Real Russia* and Betty Roland’s *Caviar for Breakfast* as belonging to ‘the now defunct tradition of travel narratives by adherents of the Left bearing witness to the once obligatory pilgrimage to the Land of the Soviets.’\(^{12}\) McNair and David Carter (upon whose work he relies) treat these travel narratives as a unified tradition extending throughout the Soviet period. This is, however, a simplification. A concrete examination of the

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historical development of both the USSR and the world communist movement reveals three distinct phases of travel narrative: ‘revolutionary witness narratives’, ‘post-revolutionary travel narratives’ and ‘Stalinist travel narratives’.

The first kind of narrative (the revolutionary witness narrative) involves journalists – either those already in Russia (such as Harold Williams, Morgan Philips Price and Arthur Ransome) or others quickly making their way there (for example, John Reed, Louise Bryant and Albert Rhys Williams) – documenting the revolutionary upsurge as it took place. Their accounts differ from later travel narratives in that, while showing an acute consciousness of Russia as an exotic and foreign land, they focus on events rather than place. John Reed’s *Ten Days that Shook the World*, the most famous of these revolutionary witness narratives, is structured (as its title suggests) around chronology rather than geography, tracing the development of the revolution over its most crucial period. Russia is the site of the narrative; it is not the narrative itself. Reed’s text is about history; it chronicles transformation and therefore emphasises familiarity – striking workers, demonstrations, political debates and so on – as much as an encounter with a different world.

The second phase of travel narrative (the post-revolutionary travel narrative) developed after the revolution, when Russia attracted a different kind of visitor – the investigator making his or her way to the struggling Soviet regime to examine the nature of the new society. As early as 1920, such expeditions, and the post-revolutionary travel narratives that accompanied them, were already so common that George Lansbury introduced his *What I Saw in Russia* with the apologetic ‘like everyone else these days who goes to Russia, I am writing a book.’

These post-revolutionary travel narratives are many and varied. Formally, they are much more diverse than later texts – alongside journalistic accounts they

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include, for instance, collections of letters, interviews, and reports of official delegations. This diversity stems from the specific circumstances of their creation. Unlike later accounts of the Soviet Union, the texts emerged on an idiosyncratic basis rather than as the culmination of structured, official tours. In Australia, post-revolutionary travel narratives were published by presses representing different (and even competing) political tendencies, such as the pro-communist Andrade’s Bookshop (In Russia, Victorious Russia) and the socialist Ross’s Book Service (Red Russia in 1920, Inside Soviet Russia). Such publishers often constructed books themselves, shaping the material from an array of unlikely sources. Andrade’s edition of Professor Goode’s writings contains, for instance, an introduction by veteran socialist Percy Laidler explaining:

Professor Goode went to Russia in the middle of 1919 as special press correspondent of the Manchester Guardian. Many articles were written by him and appeared in the columns of the Guardian of recent dates. The matter selected for this pamphlet is not the whole of the matter which appeared in those columns but we are pleased to state that those who wish to read more of Professor Goode’s views on Russia will be able to do so from a book entitled Bolshevism at Work written by the Professor and now being published in England.

The militants in the circle around Andrade’s conceived, designed and distributed the Goode tract for their own purposes – which perhaps explains its rather effusive title (In Russia: Splendid Order, Wonderful Organisation and Good Conditions for Everybody).

During this period, Western activists could travel through the Soviet Union and conduct their investigations with relative freedom. Just as importantly, they were still able to envisage the society in construction there simply as a more advanced manifestation of their own struggle. The travel narratives of the twenties were often explicitly intended as a political intervention into the labour movement at home: not simply an exultation of the achievement of the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union but an

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19 Goode In Russia, p. i.
attempt to encourage socialists in the West to adopt particular policies identified with Leninism – the rejection of parliamentary democracy in favour of the council system articulated in *State and Revolution*, for example.\(^{20}\) Within Australia, the early accounts of visits to the Soviet Union were widely quoted in the factional manoeuvring of the various pro-communist sects – not just to contrast socialism with capitalism, but also to provide immediate information on Marxist tactics and strategy.\(^{21}\) The post-revolutionary travel narratives accordingly played an important role in the formation of the Communist Party of Australia.\(^{22}\)

By the end of the twenties, the bureaucratisation within the Soviet Union led to a qualitative change in the nature of the Soviet state, with the so-called ‘Stalin revolution’ creating what Sheila Fitzpatrick calls ‘radically new and durable political economic, social and cultural structures that were to last for half a century.’\(^{23}\) The launch of the first Five Year Plan in 1928 marked the consolidation of Stalin’s regime, with the onset of forced collectivisation, the destruction of the last vestiges of trade union power in industry, and an intensification of political repression. To provide only the most obvious measure, the number of prisoners in the penal camps increased from perhaps 30 000 in 1928 to 650 000 in 1930. By 1933, it had grown to some five million.\(^{24}\)

The power of the state apparatus enabled the regime to supervise visitors far more tightly; the gulf between egalitarian rhetoric and repressive reality made such supervision necessary. Thereafter, the Soviet authorities consciously devoted considerable attention to important dignitaries, ensuring they received the appropriate impression of socialist construction. As Katharine Susannah Prichard rather guilelessly explained: ‘What strikes a stranger is the extraordinary amount of precise information that is always available in connection with any subject he or she may happen to be interested in.’\(^{25}\)

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\(^{21}\) In his introduction to *Victorious Russia*, Moses Baritz makes the point explicit: ‘That is why this pamphlet is irresistible. It is an armoury of facts’ (McBride, p. i).

\(^{22}\) See, for instance, the account of R. S. Ross’ speech on Soviet Russia, reported in ‘Sunday Night Meeting at the Socialist Hall: Soviets and Labor Party’, *Socialist*, 12 December 1919. More generally, see Ross, E. *The Russian Revolution*, p. 20.


\(^{25}\) Prichard *The Real Russia*, p. 55.
The process of Stalinisation within the Soviet Union also transformed the international communist movement. Throughout the late twenties, the independent-minded militants who had used the early post-revolutionary travel narratives to construct their own communist parties found themselves pushed aside by a new breed of functionaries entirely loyal to Moscow. In his history of the Australian party, Tom O’Lincoln notes:

Stalinisation meant two things first of all: the disciplined implementation by the Australian party of a new international line ‘which takes its place everywhere’ and a determined attempt to organise the party along the lines demanded by the Comintern … It also meant authoritarian control, for which purpose a new constitution was introduced. The key ruling body on paper was the Central Committee, but in reality the Secretariat ran things because it was the transmission belt for Comintern policy, to which the whole party was subordinate.  

In Australia, the transformation of the Communist Party along Stalinist lines coincided with its first real spurt of growth, providing the organisation with the strength to support a more robust literary infrastructure. As Stuart Macintyre puts it:

Organisations such as Friends of the Soviet Union propagated more systematically the achievements of the socialist sixth of the world … As the Communist International exercised a more regular supervision of the Australian party, so Soviet communism pressed more heavily on the loyalty of its members.  

The new conditions gave rise to a third kind of narrative about the Soviet Union: the Stalinist travel narrative. From the late twenties, such accounts were no longer constructed from different sources by disparate publishers but were printed by party fronts, advertised in the party press and sold by party members. For the Communist Party of Australia, the political importance of these tours lay less in the immediate experiences of the relatively small number of participants and more in the written accounts these participants produced, which could be published and distributed by party-controlled organisations to build support for the Soviet Union.

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and, by extension, the communist project. The Stalinist travel narratives are not the ad hoc constructions of the earlier phases and lack the formal diversity of post-revolutionary narratives. Indeed, the elements that David Carter identifies in travel narratives as a whole should be understood as belonging specifically to Stalinist travel narratives, for it is in this third phase alone that they appear consistently.

Carter describes ‘the journey narrative of the literary witness’ and argues that:

it makes a difference that these are narratives structured around journeys; that the narrator is there as a witness; that the author is already an author, a recognised figure of literary or cultural authority. In short, these literary accounts of the USSR are unlike standard scholarly or political works. Although they will summon historical, economic and political discourses, more appropriate generic co-ordinates are those of the traveller’s tale, autobiography/memoir and the literary utopia.

The re-emergence of the much older tradition of the literary utopia within the framework of the Stalinist travel narrative can be understood in terms of the classical Marxist distinction between utopian and scientific socialism. Marx and Engels understood utopianism not in the vernacular sense of any form of high-minded dreaming but, as Hal Draper explains, as ‘that way of thinking about the future which makes the future an arbitrary isolate, which breaks away from the historical-developmental link with reality (i.e. with history up-to-now).’ In precisely this fashion, the Stalinist theory of ‘socialism in one country’ severed the hitherto universally accepted connection between the development of a socialist state and the progress of the international workers’ movement. Rather than the Soviet Union existing in a dialectical relationship with both labour struggles and the world economy, ‘socialism in one country’ positioned it as an independent and self-sufficient redoubt of socialism, its fortunes, in effect, outside historical time and space. Thus the theory – and the practice that underpinned it – necessarily fostered utopianism (in Marx and Engels’ sense) amongst communist ideologues by separating the construction of a new social system in the Soviet Union from the material

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29 Carter ‘Journeys in Genre’, p. 164.

conditions upon which it depended. In other words, the Stalinists were utopians not because they were idealistic (many were, in fact, utterly cynical) but because their project no longer rested upon the kind of economic transformation (world revolution) that had hitherto provided the material base for Marxian socialism.

As the exiled Soviet leader Leon Trotsky argued:

to attempt, regardless of the geographical, cultural and historical conditions of the country’s development, which constitutes a part of the world unity, to realise a shut-off proportionality of all the branches of economy within a national framework, means to pursue a reactionary utopia. If the heralds and supporters of this theory nevertheless participate in the international revolutionary struggle (with what success is a different question) it is because, as hopeless eclectics, they mechanically combine abstract internationalism with reactionary utopian national socialism.\textsuperscript{31}

The fully-developed Stalinist travel narrative emerged from this combination of abstract internationalism and reactionary utopian national socialism. Whereas the Australian radicals of the early twenties used the post-revolutionary travel narratives of Goode and McBride to intervene in strategic or theoretical arguments at home, the Stalinist enthusiast found in Soviet Russia a land that combined a purely sentimental adherence to international solidarity with a declared independence from the social relations that had previously provided that solidarity with a material base. In the absence of a nexus between the movement for socialism in Australia and the emerging society in the Soviet Union, the Stalinist travel narrative evolved into full-blown utopianism.

Within the Australian context, the Stalinist travel narratives could draw upon a rich legacy of literary utopianism. The utopian texts by Edward Bellamy and William Morris (widely read by pre-Leninist socialists in Australia) originally functioned in a very similar way, in that they described the virtues and achievements of a society with no material connection to the everyday world of Australia. Bruce Scates, in his study of the utopian discourses of the 1890s, notes how:

In their vision of the future, the nineteenth century reader found a powerful condemnation of the past. Indeed, both Bellamy and Morris oppose one world and another, the novel’s heroes discovering the achievements of the new society and realising the failings of their own. This reckoning with the future is made all the easier by the tolerance of their hosts. Kindly old professors, simple boatmen and generous maidens lead the reader through utopia, a Socratic dialogue answering any objection he or she might have.32

These dialogues – with almost identical professors, boatmen and maidens – became, in the thirties, a familiar staple of Stalinist travel narratives.

The reappropriation of pre-Leninist utopianism within the communist movement could only take place covertly since the Stalinist regime continued to proclaim its fidelity to a Marxist tradition explicitly opposed to utopianism. The Stalinist travel narrative therefore appropriates the utopian genre only by declaring its anti-utopianism, specifically, its commitment to objective observation and scientific truth. Carter points out that:

Bellamy’s Looking Backward and Morris’s News from Nowhere were part of the generic field in which the actual travellers to the USSR had to distinguish themselves. For a start they had to insist upon their non-fictionality, although the template of fictional form is potent still for suggesting things incredible but true.33

It is now possible to understand the generic co-ordinates Carter provides:

First, the journey structure, the journey to another place or time … Second, the traveller-narrator who journeys from our familiar world, bears witness to the transformed world, and returns. This gives the genre its characteristic three parts: point of entry, journey around the new world, return to the now-estranged familiar world … Third is a recurrent pattern of inversion in which the principles of the traveller’s (and reader’s) world are systematically turned upside down as the journey proceeds.34

33 Carter ‘Journeys in Genre’, p. 166.
34 Carter., p. 165.
The distinctive elements of the Stalinist travel narrative can now be identified in Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *The Real Russia*. 
**Katharine Susannah Prichard’s The Real Russia as a Stalinist travel narrative**

The era of the Stalinist travel narrative lasted from the late twenties until the end of World War Two. In the midst of this period, Betty Roland and Katharine Prichard began working on their accounts of life in the Soviet Union.

Katharine Susannah Prichard went to the Soviet Union in a more-or-less official capacity as a prominent member of the Communist Party. Her account of her journey was initially serialised in the *Herald* in 1934. When the *Herald* bowed to political pressure and discontinued the serialisation, the manuscript was printed by a publisher associated with the Communist Party of Australia.

Betty Roland – or Davies, as she was then – travelled ‘privately’ to the Soviet Union with the radical intellectual Guido Baracchi, but the difference between her visit and Prichard’s was not as great as might seem. Baracchi’s enthusiasm for visiting the Soviet Union had been spurred by earlier ‘official’ trips. He was active in the Friends of the Soviet Union as it organised the first expedition headed by Itzhak Gust, and he took part in the abortive attempts of the Melbourne University Labour Club to organise its own Russian trip. Furthermore, prior to his departure, Baracchi had applied (unsuccessfully) to rejoin the Communist Party of Australia, and he and Roland studied Marxist theory together on the journey to the Soviet Union. Roland and Baracchi might not have been in the Soviet Union on a party-sponsored expedition, but they were far from complete outsiders.

The most obvious difference between *The Real Russia* and *Caviar for Breakfast* relates to the circumstances of publication. Roland (already a playwright of reputation) intended her travels to culminate in a book, and she worked on a manuscript during her time in Moscow. Yet her account of the trip was not published until some forty years later, and the gulf between the circumstances of its composition and its eventual publication means that, though *Caviar for Breakfast*

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35 After which, for a variety of reasons – including the rise of the other Stalinist states – the genre weakened. A study of the fourth and final phase of Soviet travel narratives is not possible in a thesis of this length.
36 McNair, p. 468.
37 Roland *Caviar for Breakfast*, Quartet, 1979, p. 129.
retains elements of a Stalinist travel narrative, the text as a whole functions in quite a different way.

Roland’s text will be examined in detail later. For now, a comparative reading of *Caviar for Breakfast* with *The Real Russia* will illuminate some of the peculiarities of Prichard’s properly Stalinist travel narrative.

Both books are framed by Carter’s ‘journey structure’, with the requisite account of the narrator’s travels to the Soviet Union signalling:

the text’s departure for the other place, the other generic site. The voyage connects the ‘future’ with the familiar world while marking it off as other.38

The descriptions of the journey are strikingly similar. Prichard describes her vessel leaving port:

As the first swell of the outer sea struck us, at the mouth of the Thames, someone began to sing. A girl cleaning brasses in an alley way. In the forepeak, a man’s voice joined her. From all parts of the ship, voices took up the song. Soon the whole crew was singing.39

Roland provides a parallel description of her arrival in Leningrad:

Unable to restrain themselves, some of the more enthusiastic members of the company broke into a chorus of revolutionary songs, the workmen on the docks heard them and waved back, shouted greetings and picked up the tunes.40

Both books describe what Stuart Macintyre calls the ‘standard inventory of attractions’ – schools, hospitals, factories and so on – which are used for appropriate comparisons with their Australian equivalents.41

In *The Real Russia*, such comparisons are entirely to the advantage of the Soviet Union, with Prichard’s chapter titles indicative of her ecumenical enthusiasms:

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38 Carter ‘Journeys in Genre’, p. 167.
39 Prichard *The Real Russia*, p. 5.
40 Roland *Caviar for Breakfast*, Quartet, 1979, p. 15.
41 Macintyre, p. 368.

*Caviar for Breakfast* is more critical, even to the extent of including a glimpse of collectivisation’s human toll:

Hordes of earth-coloured men and women wait apathetically for the boat to arrive: their clothes, their faces, hair and eyes the same drab hue of wretchedness. All their poor belongings – a roll of bedding, a kettle, possibly a loaf of bread, a little dust that they call tea, a few pieces of dried fish, a cucumber, are carried on their backs. They have no shoes: their feet are wrapped in rags, held in place by string.

At the same time, Roland’s text retains the comparative structure – and her contrasts are not always to the disadvantage of the Soviet Union. Consider, for instance, her discussion of unemployment:

The contrast between the optimism here and the pessimism of the outside world is striking. I remember the hopeless men who sat in the Melbourne parks, heads bowed in their hands, waiting for the next hand-out from the soup kitchen; the long queues waiting for the dole; the workless men – and women – who used to tramp along the highway from Melbourne to Sydney hoping things would be better at the other end, and the endless stream tramping in the opposite direction, from Sydney to Melbourne, in the fruitless search for work … Here, there are more jobs than there are workers to fill them, and many of them work two shifts a day.

It might seem that the difference between the two texts is simply one of degree: that Prichard’s narrative differs from Roland’s only to the extent that it is less critical of the Soviet Union. The qualitative difference becomes apparent, however, in relation to Carter’s second point, the presence within the Stalinist travel narrative of ‘the traveller-narrator who journeys from our familiar world, bears witness to the transformed world, and returns.’ The very different function of the narrator in *The Real Russia* and *Caviar for Breakfast* can be illustrated by examining a seemingly minor discrepancy: the question of Katharine Susannah Prichard’s accommodation.

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42 Carter, p. 168.
43 Roland *Caviar for Breakfast*, Quartet, 1979, p. 154.
44 Roland, p. 71.
In *The Real Russia*, Prichard writes:

As for me, taking my own wilful way, I roamed about by myself, during my first days in Moscow … I had studied Russian, however, and when my ear was tuned in, managed with odds and ends of French and German, to find friends and a room with them in a working-class quarter.

It was just what I had been hoping for – an eyrie from which I could watch the every-day life of the people.\(^{45}\)

In *Caviar for Breakfast*, however, Roland describes how:

[Prichard] had just arrived in Moscow and is staying at the Lux Hotel, a place reserved for party members, trade union officials and delegates from abroad. It is crowded and expensive, and she does not like the atmosphere, which strikes her as being rather depressing. We had heard about the Lux from Freda, who said it was full of political go-getters, so have suggested to Katharine that she move in with us, in true Moscow fashion.\(^{46}\)

There are several issues involved in the differences between these passages. In part, of course, Prichard wants to deny the suggestion of nepotism that might be raised either by staying at the Lux or by organising special accommodation with friends. She seeks to emphasise her independence by stressing her proximity to ordinary Soviet workers and her alleged fluency in Russian (a language which, as McNair points out, she could barely speak).\(^{47}\)

But the differences between the two books also relate to the inability of the narrative of *The Real Russia* to touch on Prichard’s private emotions, even when these bear no obvious relation to the Soviet Union.

In *Caviar for Breakfast*, Roland discusses Prichard’s arrival largely in terms of its impact on her personal life. She welcomes Prichard as much because her presence will ease a rupture in her relationship with Baracchi as for any political reason, and she goes on to describe the effect of Prichard’s visit on her sexual relations. It is in the

\(^{45}\) Prichard *The Real Russia*, p. 8.

\(^{46}\) Roland *Caviar for Breakfast*, Quartet, 1979, p. 75.

\(^{47}\) McNair, p. 470.
same mode of intimate disclosure that Roland reveals Prichard’s subsequent unease about what she has seen in the Soviet Union:

None of her former optimism remained. During the weeks spent here she had seen so much and learnt so much that she had never dreamed of, and her heart was sick … We were all depressed and silent, saddened by the parting, saddened too by all that we had learnt.

Katharine sat huddled in her corner staring out of the window at the few muffled figures shuffling along the wharf.

‘When I first arrived and saw those ragged figures, I felt I wanted to put my arms around them; they were my comrades. Now … ’

Her voice trailed off and we said nothing, knowing what she meant.\(^{48}\)

The function of confession in *Caviar for Breakfast* will become clear in due course. For the time being, it is necessary to explore the absence of anything similar in Prichard’s narrative. That is, *The Real Russia* discloses almost nothing about the personal circumstances of the traveller whose voyage it chronicles. It does not mention, for instance, Prichard’s communist affiliations and it leaves the purpose of her trip vague:

There is no difficulty, in ordinary circumstances, about making a visit to the Soviet Union. It is no longer a great adventure even … Nobody suggested what I should do; where I should go. I just arrived and proceeded, as I have done in London, Paris, New York, Melbourne or Sydney … \(^{49}\)

These omissions might be explained in terms of Prichard’s desire to stress her status as an independent investigator rather than a loyal communist were her text not so consistently silent about even the most innocuous of personal matters. Though Prichard is central to the narrative, the reader discovers very little about her. When a Shortzi peasant asks Prichard how old she is, whether she has a husband and how she comes to be travelling, the reader hears the questions – but not Prichard’s answers.\(^{50}\)

\(^{48}\) Roland *Caviar for Breakfast*, Quartet, 1979, p. 96.
\(^{49}\) Prichard *The Real Russia*, p. 7.
\(^{50}\) Prichard., p. 111.
As narrator, Prichard mentions her friendships with various Russians but the text inexorably draws away from discussion of what the relationships mean to her and describes instead the friends:

Tanya was the most fascinating person. Warm-hearted, generous and so kind. Seeing her in her smart navy-blue coat and shirt, felt hat, grey kid shoes and silk stockings, you had difficulty in envisaging a factory girl who until after the revolution was quite illiterate.51

In this, *The Real Russia* is typical of its genre. The necessity of the Stalinist travel narrative to anchor truth in experience forces the text to self-consciously foreground its author as a reliable and objective witness. McNair notes that, in general:

professional expertise and, on occasion, linguistic competence, are typically cited in authentication of what might otherwise seem partisan testimonies in the Soviet achievement. Thus, Suzanne Abramovich’s medical degrees are listed on her title page, while her publisher assures us she is ‘linguistically equipped with English, German and Russian’; WJ Thomas is presented as ‘Australia’s foremost authority on the social and economic structure of the USSR’; and Mullins suggests he has sufficient knowledge of Russian ‘to get along fairly well without having to rely entirely on officially imparted information.’52

The content of these autobiographical assertions matters much less than the form. While some Stalinist travel narratives list the qualifications of their authors, many others locate authority in a corresponding absence of professional expertise – stressing, for instance, the working-class origins of the traveller. Allan Fisher, author of the 1932 *Moscow Impressions*, might be ‘Professor of Economics, Otago University’ but Tom Wright’s pamphlet is subtitled ‘An Australian Trade Union Delegate’s Report’, just as L. A. Mullins’ is entitled *A Railwayman in Russia* and W. A. Smith’s *A Tramwayman Talks on Russia*, while waterside workers Ben Scott and

51 Prichard, p. 132.
52 McNair, p. 466.
Jim Healy produce *Red Cargo*.

In these instances, the authors’ proletarian backgrounds function formally in the same way as the professional credentials of other visitors, even though the content is entirely different.

The declaration of trustworthiness is thus largely performative, its authority residing simply in the declaration. While the claim of reliability needs to be made, its contours are not (within the text) important and are never explored. Smith describes his ‘natural, curious, adventurous and investigating nature’ and his ‘insatiable desire for first hand knowledge of things’. But these qualities no more impinge upon his exploration of Russia than, say, Abramovich’s medical background affects her description of the Soviet health system.

The Stalinist travel narrative must be, then, autobiographical – but only in a narrowly prescribed fashion. The exploration of the writing self can take place only insofar as is necessary to provide a source of authority for the narrative. Unlike the travelogues of the twenties, the Stalinist travel narrative focuses not on politics or revolutionary theory but on the characteristically utopian trope of the transformation of daily life. The provision of prosaic personal information about the narrator cannot be permitted since the text needs to show the everyday becoming fantastic, in a place outside history. It is precisely in the realm of the private that the Soviet Union must be experienced as radically other. As Carter argues:

> The utopian themes of *The Real Russia* lie in its revelation of the application of science to everyday life; the convergence of ‘cultural development’ and ‘industrial production’; the planning of new cities and collective farms; the principle of social visibility; and, as the point of all these, the ‘production’ of a new kind of person.

The transformation of ordinary people is, however, something to be observed in others rather than experienced by a narrator who, by definition, must be able to return bringing the good news to the everyday world of the West. The Stalinist travel narrative tends, therefore, towards a silence about the inner life of the traveller and so

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54 Carter ‘Journeys in Genre’, p. 168.
often shifts focus, in a disconcerting fashion, away from the narrator and onto others in whom suitable transformations can be observed.

Consider L. A. Mullins, the author of *A Railwayman in Russia*. Though Mullins narrates his journey throughout the Soviet Union, he remains, like Prichard, a consistently absent presence. With the exception of a few homely touches – he doesn’t initially like the black bread, he falls asleep after the May Day parade thinking of the revolutionary songs he hears on ‘the most glorious day of my life’ – he says little about what the trip means to him. Symptomatically, he often describes his personal experiences from the point of view of others. ‘Our departure from Port Melbourne pier will live long in the memory of that huge crowd who witnessed it,’ he explains, in a typical passage. Of his arrival in the Soviet Union, he writes:

> We are nearing the new land. As the train speeds on through Latvia, and the day draws to a close, all eyes of the three hundred delegates on our train are eagerly searching for a glimpse of the country they have come so far to see. They are about to be introduced to a new world, and are all keyed up to a high state of excitement. [italics mine]55

Something very similar happens in *The Real Russia*. The text opens with Prichard discussing her writerly intentions:

> In my wanderings through Soviet Russia and Siberia, I travelled something like thirty thousand miles … I want to write about them in splashes of colour, gouts of phrases as Walt Whitman would have, or Mayakovski: paint them after the manner of the French symbolists, images seething and swarming over each other, as they lie in my mind.56

But, as narrator, Prichard goes on to say nothing about her own writing, even when she describes books and writing within the Soviet Union. Instead, over and over again, she narrates the transformations she sees in the daily lives of others. She gives the story of Darya Tretyakova, an assistant technician at a coke plant:

55 Mullins *A Railwayman in Russia.*
‘In the old days, a woman was not allowed to know anything,’ Tretyakova said. ‘We worked from dawn until dark in the villages, at sowing time and harvest. It was a hard life and often there was not enough bread. Now we work seven hours a day, the children go to school, there is plenty of bread, I can learn and attend meetings. We are all happy.’

Prichard also tells of a Tartar mechanic:

A boy’s curiosity about machines brought him to Kuznetskstroi two years ago, it seems. He worked in the rolling mills and has been in charge of this machine for five months. All the squirrels in the Urals would not tempt him to desert it.

Many similar examples could be adduced.

Amongst these transformations in the people she meets, Prichard remains almost invisible. Nowhere is this more apparent than in relation to her husband, Hugo ‘Jim’ Throssell. As narrator, Prichard makes no mention of her marriage, even though Throssell – who, as a Victoria Cross winner, was a public figure in his own right – committed suicide in their Perth home before she returned to Australia. Her son Ric Throssell recalls how Prichard wrote The Real Russia while still mourning Hugo Throssell’s loss: she must ‘force herself to get back to the notes of her journeys through the USSR.’

In her later pamphlet Why I Am a Communist, Prichard explicitly discusses how her faith in communism provided consolation for the death of Throssell. Yet she says nothing of this in The Real Russia, a book that contains no mention either of Throssell or his suicide.

Again, it is relevant to compare Roland’s far more intimate account of Prichard’s relationship with Throssell:

[Prichard] brightened and began to speak of home, of the pretty house at Greenmount, of Ric, her son, and Jimmy waiting there to welcome her.

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57 Prichard, p. 84.
58 Prichard, p. 95.
'How good it’s going to be to see them both again,’ she said. ‘My Jimmy’s been so good to me, so understanding. Putting up with all my pranks.’ Her voice was tender and her eyes glowed with a gentle happiness. ‘He shot some possums and made a pair of fur-lined boots for me and, like a fool, I left them in London, never dreaming that I’d need them. When I’ve been blue with cold in Siberia, I’ve thought of them. What wouldn’t I have given to have had them then! How he’ll scold me when he hears about it. And for getting thin. He’ll fuss over me and make me eat all kinds of nourishing food to “fat me up” again when I get home.’

Such a passage is inconceivable in The Real Russia, not simply because homesickness might imply an absence of the necessary enthusiasm for the Soviet Union, but because the genre cannot provide space for a private sphere – other than as the realm of the banal rendered wondrous by the land of socialism.

While it matters that Prichard’s text is the account of a writer (for this provides it with its authority), the individuality of that writer remains utterly secondary. Though she is narrator, she cannot discuss the most significant event that befalls her (her husband’s death). The book is a memoir, but it is not about her.

 Appropriately, the publishers render the author’s first and second names incorrectly on its cover. The book might just as well be by a famous novelist called ‘Katherine Suzanne Prichard’ as by the real Katharine Susannah Prichard.

 Of course, while The Real Russia cleaves to strong generic conventions, these conventions remain entirely unspoken. By its nature, the Stalinist travel narrative cannot be theorised, since the returning traveller must always declare that nothing shapes his or her account other than the wonders of the journey. Yet, even as the ‘Stalin revolution’ fostered the Stalinist travel narrative, it also laid the basis for a more systematic theorisation of literary production which would eventually impact on Katharine Prichard’s biographical and autobiographical writing.

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61 Roland Caviar for Breakfast, Quartet, 1979, p. 97.
It has been argued that *The Real Russia* should be understood not as an example of socialist realism but as a Stalinist travel narrative, its autobiographical elements constrained by the untheorised but strong generic requirements of the form.

Socialist realism did, however, play an important role in Katharine Prichard’s later biographical and autobiographical writings. Before turning specifically to these, it is first necessary to discuss the historical development of socialist realism, both within the Soviet Union and within Australia.

Analyses of socialist realism too often take place simply at a theoretical level. Clearly, socialist realism is not difficult to critique. It sources its claim to Marxist orthodoxy in a very selective reading of scattered quotations from socialist authorities – turning, for instance, Engels’ passing remarks about ‘representative’ figures in the writings of Lassalle into the basis for a fully fledged conception of character, and transforming Lenin’s call for party control over party propagandists into an insistence on political supervision of creative writers. Theoretically, it draws on the crude ‘reflection theory’ of consciousness outlined in Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, in which human consciousness is an unproblematic copy or reflection of an external reality (which, therefore, can simply be reproduced in art or literature). As Terry Eagleton points out:

> In its cruder formulations, the idea that literature ‘reflects’ reality is clearly inadequate. It suggests a passive, mechanistic relationship between literature and society, as though the work, like a mirror or photographic plate, merely inertly registered what was happening ‘out there’.  

A much more sophisticated account of consciousness was available within the Marxist tradition. In his *Philosophical Notebooks*, Lenin, after renewed study of Hegel, explicitly breaks with reflection theory in favour of a much more dialectical theory of cognition that emphasises the contradiction between essence and appearance and establishes consciousness, not just as a reflection of the world, but also as a factor

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63 Eagleton, p. 48.
capable, through practice, of shaping it. Human knowledge, according to Lenin, depends upon an active process of abstraction, capable of distinguishing between essence and appearance, rather than passive reflection, an insight with profound consequences for the theorisation of literary production.\textsuperscript{64}

Why, then, were such ideas ignored? Why was socialist realism so theoretically crude? An adequate answer necessitates a recognition that socialist realism cannot be engaged purely as a body of ideas, since ideas are, in many ways, its least important aspect.

Consider, for instance, the widely celebrated clash between Lukács and Brecht over, amongst other questions, the nature of socialist realism. It is often forgotten that none of Brecht’s responses to Lukács were ever published during his lifetime, as the editors of the English translation of the debate explain:

Whether Brecht submitted them to Das Wort in Moscow and they were rejected, or whether his own characteristic tactical prudence dissuaded him from ever sending them, still remains unclear. … At the height of the Great Terror, Brecht may well have himself decided against any release of these articles.\textsuperscript{65}

Brecht’s ‘tactical prudence’ – and the reasons for it – serve as a reminder that socialist realism cannot be properly understood in isolation from developments within the USSR and the international communist movement. It needs, in other words, to be seen historically.

In the years immediately after the revolution, the regime displayed a remarkably liberal attitude towards culture, as Marcel Liebman notes:

Literature and the arts … flourished remarkably until quite late in the 1920s. The People’s Commissariat of Education, under the enlightened direction of Anatol Lunacharsky, followed a ‘policy of tolerance’ to the advantage of the widest diversity of schools and tendencies in the artistic and intellectual sphere, including the most contradictory.\textsuperscript{66}

The creation of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1932 marked a fundamental shift in policies towards literature, a shift consolidated by the 1934 First Soviet Writers’ Congress. In other words, socialist realism emerged as part of the ‘Stalin revolution’ as the regime set about installing a state-sanctioned orthodoxy of the arts. By 1934, socialist realism represented, as even its long-time supporter Jack Beasley acknowledges, an ‘official policy, endorsed by the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] and the government and thus, for all practical purposes … Soviet law.’

While socialist realism became the official mode of Soviet literary criticism, it was initially adopted not as a theory of interpretation so much as a method of production. From the early thirties, the Soviet Literary Institute explicitly trained writers to copy the favoured literary models and to respond to the citation of exemplary texts by party leaders. Novels that followed the approved pattern attracted generous royalties, while authors received inducements such as dachas and ‘creative’ stays at Writers’ Houses.

Alongside such carrots, the Soviet authorities wielded numerous sticks. Brecht once quipped of Soviet literary theorists that ‘every one of their criticisms contains a threat’. This was quite literally true. In 1939, when the theatre producer Vsevolod Meyerhold declared publicly that ‘this pitiable and sterile thing called socialist realism has nothing to do with art’, the statement was regarded not as a harmless aesthetic judgement but a challenge to state power. He was duly arrested the following day, and eventually died in custody.

As Katerina Clark dryly puts it:

when authoritative voices cried out, ‘Give us more heroes like X [the hero of some model novel],’ the cry did not fall on entirely deaf ears.

As a result, the business of writing novels soon became comparable to the procedure followed by medieval icon painters. Just as the icon painter looked to his original to find the correct angle for a given theme, and so on, so the Soviet novelist

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68 Quoted in Jameson, p. 64.
69 Eagleton, p. 40.
could copy the gestures, facial expressions, actions, symbols, etc, used in the various canonical texts.\(^{70}\)

Why did the Soviet regime need such control over literary production? The intensity of the USSR’s competition with the West in the late twenties spurred Stalin’s policies of forced collectivisation in which grain was requisitioned for industrialisation. Collectivisation drove millions of peasants from the countryside and into the cities where they formed a new labour force for the emerging factories. The process was, in many ways, analogous with the expropriation of the English peasantry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, yet it took place in a fraction of the time and so involved far more concentrated and intense suffering.

Moshe Lewin describes the period of collectivisation as producing a ‘quicksand society’ in which:

workers, administrators, specialists, party apparatus men, and, in great masses, peasants were all moving around and changing jobs, creating unwanted surpluses in some places and dearths in others, losing skills or failing to acquire them, creating streams and floods in which families were destroyed, children lost, and morality dissolved. Social, administrative, industrial, and political structures were all in flux.\(^{71}\)

Faced with such turmoil, the authorities saw culture as a tool for renewing social cohesion. Within the Soviet Union, socialist realism was intended to reach the bureaucratic layer supporting Stalin: the men and women who had been thrust into managerial positions and were suddenly performing the function of Russia’s traditional middle class but without its accumulated cultural capital. As Alex Callinicos notes:

rapid industrialisation demanded that unskilled workers became skilled, that skilled workers became foremen, that technicians became engineers ... The consequence was a large-scale influx of workers and ex-workers into managerial and technical positions ... Between 1930 and 1933 some 660 000 ‘worker Communists’, amounting to between ten and fifteen per cent of the industrial workforce in 1930

\(^{70}\) Clark The Soviet Novel, p. 4.  
moved into white collar positions. [T]he rise of some workers out of their class and
the privileges granted others – the shock-workers and Stakhanovites rewarded for
high productivity – helped widen the regime’s social base.\textsuperscript{72}

Sheila Fitzpatrick describes the pressure on this layer to become ‘cultured’:

Members of the new elite – many of them recently upwardly mobile from the
working class and peasantry – had to acquire the same cultural skills … but under
more pressure. A worker who mastered \textit{War and Peace} as well as the \textit{Short Course}
was a high achiever, deserving praise; the wife of a manager who was ignorant of
Pushkin and had never seen \textit{Swan Lake} was an embarrassment. Reading the
nineteenth century classics of Russian literature, keeping up with the news and the
contemporary cultural scene, going to the theatre, having your children learn the
piano – this was all part of the culture expected of people in managerial and
professional jobs.\textsuperscript{73}

To stabilise society in the midst of this tumult, it was necessary to rapidly supply
the bureaucrats and managers with the cultural knowledge and values that would
legitimise their new roles, both in their eyes and in the eyes of others. The new
literature was therefore consciously pedagogical and consciously didactic, far more so
than its conventional bourgeois equivalent.\textsuperscript{74}

At the same time, the readers of socialist realism lacked literary sophistication
– Fitzpatrick notes that the acquisition of ‘culture’ included lessons in not spitting nor
stubbing out cigarettes on the table – and harboured a quite different set of political
attitudes to the workers who had consumed radically experimental writing
immediately after the revolution. The books produced during the heroic phase of the
revolution had been written by and for active revolutionaries; the books the authorities
required in the thirties sought to reach newly promoted managers in order to reconcile
them and those beneath them with the Stalinist status quo.

In this context, socialist realism also eschewed the formal innovations of
Western modernism. Arcane questions about representation were not deemed

\textsuperscript{72} Callinicos, \textit{Revenge of History}, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{73} Fitzpatrick, S. \textit{Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the
1930s}, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{74} On the extraordinary expansion of educational programs in the Soviet Union, see Fitzpatrick,
\textit{Everyday Stalinism}, p. 87.
appropriate for bureaucrats still learning not to spit and, at the First Soviet Writers’ Congress, Karl Radek explicitly denounced those Soviet writers who took an interest in ‘difficult’ writers like James Joyce. ‘The slogan of socialist realism,’ he chided them, ‘is as simple and understandable as was the slogan of the Soviets, the slogan of industrialisation, of the collectivisation of our country.’

It is in this sense that the critic Evgeny Dobrenko describes socialist realism as a ‘disaster of middlebrow taste’:

socialist realism got through the strait between the Scylla of ‘mass literature’ and the Charybdis of ‘elite literature’. Its artistic production never congealed into either of those two traditional forms, and its stylistic neutrality (the notorious ‘stylelessness’ and ‘grayness’ of socialist realism) was the result of this ‘third way.’

Dobrenko’s analysis refers largely to the literature produced within the Soviet Union. But socialist realism was, of course, also a theory adopted by communists elsewhere in the world. Indeed, part of the function of the Writers’ Congress was to introduce the new discourse to a worldwide audience. To understand the international application of socialist realism, it is necessary to examine the changing relationship between the USSR and the international communist movement.

The proclamation of ‘socialism in one country’ in 1928 effectively marked the end of Soviet enthusiasm for world revolution. Nonetheless, Stalin still recognised the important role that the foreign communist parties might play in exerting pressure on their governments. To carry out this role effectively, they needed to influence the broadest layers of society, including intellectuals and artists.

The 1934 Soviet Writers’ Congress therefore represented a conscious attempt by the leaders of the Soviet Union to draw sympathetic foreign writers into the orbit of the communist movement. Zhdanov flatteringly told the international guests:

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We firmly believe that these few dozens of foreign comrades who are here today represent the nucleus, the core of a mighty army of proletarian writers, which will be created by the world proletarian revolution in capitalist countries.\(^78\)

The congress invited foreign writers to join its ranks; it also explicitly asserted the communist leadership’s right to direct this ‘mighty army’. Communists – including Marx and Lenin – had *commented* on literature in the past, but the congress was the first time that the party had asserted a right to *command* in the literary field.\(^79\)

It is not difficult to understand why the Stalinist leaders wanted to exert control over the literary output of foreign writers. If the intellectuals abroad were to promote Soviet foreign policy interests, they had to be responsive to Soviet direction – they would be most valuable in defending Soviet policy precisely at the times when it unexpectedly changed.

But what about the foreign writers themselves? What was the appeal of socialist realism to them?

Zhdanov’s presentation of what was expected of the ‘foreign comrades’ was exceedingly vague, largely consisting of a gloss on Stalin’s famous description of writers as ‘engineers of human souls’:

> What does this mean? … It means, in the first place, to know life, in order to depict truthfully in works of art, to depict it not scholastically, not lifelessly, not simply as ‘objective reality’, but to depict actuality in its revolutionary development …

And this in its turn denotes a rupture with romanticism of the old type, which depicted a non-existent life and non-existent heroes, leading the reader away from the antagonisms and oppression of real life into a world of the impossible, into a world of utopian dreams. Our literature, which stands with both feet firmly planted on a materialist basis, cannot be hostile to romanticism, but it must be a romanticism of a new type, revolutionary romanticism.\(^80\)

Later, the arguments presented by Zhdanov, Gorky, Radek and others evolved into a more-or-less coherent doctrine in which *narodnost*, *klassovost* and *partiinost* combined to create ‘positive heroes’, protagonists who were to be both exemplary and

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\(^{78}\) Zhdanov, A. A. ‘Soviet Literature – The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature’ in Zhdanov and Scott, p. 20.


drawn from real life, since, according to the Stalinist theorists, an accurate depiction of reality necessarily entailed a depiction of the heroic role of the Communist Party and its cadre in leading the masses.\footnote{James, C. V. \textit{Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory}, Macmillan, London, 1973, p. 11.}

It would be wrong, however, to seek an explanation for the willingness of foreign writers to endorse the Soviet Writers’ Congress in the precise details of the socialist realist method, for what the congress represented organisationally was clearly as important as anything it said. That is, it took place with the international economy stagnant and international fascism on the rise. This was a climate in which many novelists were seeking ways to integrate their political commitments into their writing. As Julie Wells notes, ‘awareness of class divisions was heightened by experience and observation of suffering during the Depression, the increased militancy of left-wing political groupings and the corollary conservative backlash.’\footnote{Wells, J. ‘The Writers’ League: A Study in Literary and Working Class Politics’, \textit{Meanjin}, vol. 46, no. 4, 1987, p. 528.}

In a world in turmoil, it no longer seemed desirable or even possible for authors to stand aloof from social questions. But how should political commitment manifest itself in literature? What was the relationship between politics and aesthetics, between propaganda and art?

Zhdanov supplied an answer. Socialist realism integrated politics and art so that political commitment became not an obstacle to artistic achievement but a necessary precondition for it. Accordingly, novelists who joined the ‘mighty army of proletarian writers’ would not be sacrificing their art but taking it to a higher level, since ‘the present state of bourgeois literature is such that it is no longer able to create great works of art.’\footnote{Zhdanov, ‘Soviet Literature’, p. 19.}

The argument – or rather assertion – possessed force not because of its intellectual merit, but because the congress brought together the most powerful political leaders of the Soviet Union to discuss literature and poetry in a manner unthinkable elsewhere in the world. In the West, bourgeois critics agonised about whether art could serve a political function; in the Soviet Union, where all novelists belonged to the Writers’ Union and Stalin himself functioned as the highest literary authority, the question no longer made sense. The congress, in and of itself, demonstrated the unity of politics and art – not \textit{theoretically} but \textit{organisationally}. Furthermore, Zhdanov extended this organisational resolution of the tension between

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{James, C. V. \textit{Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory}, Macmillan, London, 1973, p. 11.}
  \item \footnote{Zhdanov, ‘Soviet Literature’, p. 19.}
\end{itemize}
politics and literature to writers the world over: novelists who committed to socialist realism would, he explained, join ‘the front ranks of those who are fighting for a classless socialist society.’

In retrospect, the assertion of the communist leadership’s right to direct literary matters seems self-evidently authoritarian (as well as a clear break from Marxist tradition). At the time, however, many writers understood it as a positive step. Throughout the twenties and early thirties, Western communist parties – particularly the smaller ones – had displayed a dismaying philistinism about matters of art and culture. Wells describes the situation prevailing in and around the Communist Party of Australia where:

writing was often regarded as the preserve of a capitalist elite, and of secondary importance in the class struggle. The (sometimes erroneous) association of communist writers with bourgeois literary circles brought them under suspicion. As ‘declassed’ elements they had to prove their political reliability.

The Soviet Writers’ Congress, by contrast, signalled to those whose work had been treated by local communist leaders with disdain or indifference that literary questions were now of such vital political importance that the Soviet leaders – including Stalin himself – were prepared to intervene in them personally.

That many writers responded enthusiastically to this new assessment of their significance is not surprising. Wells describes how, after 1934, progressive writers set up their own organisations for the discussion of politics and literature. This is true – but it should not be forgotten that such self-activity was only made possible by the very public endorsement of literary endeavours by the Soviet communist leadership.

Because the descriptions of socialist realism provided at the congress were so vague (‘revolutionary romanticism,’ ‘realism plus a militant mood’ etc.), the acceptance of Zhdanov’s right to direct literary creation did not appear to represent much of a sacrifice since Zhdanovism did not initially seem very different from the kind of realism which many political novelists had already pragmatically adopted.

Prichard, for instance, had been struggling with the relationship between politics and art even before the formation of the Communist Party of Australia. As

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85 Wells, p. 528.
early as 1919, she was discussing the ‘propaganda value’ of her novel *Black Opal*, and contrasting it with the book’s literary worth.\textsuperscript{86} It is not, therefore, difficult to understand the appeal for her of ‘realism with a militant mood’: as Modjeska puts it, ‘one of the reasons for [Prichard’s] acceptance of [the tenets of socialist realism] was that she was already moving towards that position in her own writing.’\textsuperscript{87}

This is the context for Katharine Prichard’s engagement with socialist realism. But to understand Zhdanovism in practice, it is also necessary to turn away from the congress documents and look more specifically at the development of Stalinist literary production in Australia.

\textsuperscript{86} Throssell *Wild Weeds and Wind Flowers*, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{87} Modjeska, p. 135.
Zhdanovism and Australian literature

Katharine Susannah Prichard’s fiction has received far more critical attention than her non-fiction. Before examining her biographical and autobiographical writing, it is therefore useful to look at arguments about the effects of Zhdanovism on Prichard’s fictional writing.

That is, most (at least, most non-communist) critics see the second half of Prichard’s life as a period of literary decline, with, as Cath Ellis puts it, ‘a gradual deterioration in the quality of Prichard’s writing from the middle of her career.’88 This deterioration is generally attributed to the influence of socialist realism.

There are, however, difficulties with the way the argument is conventionally mounted. Drusilla Modjeska’s suggestion that, after her Russian visit, Prichard’s work was so affected by the new Soviet ideas on literature that she spent ‘at least seven years and perhaps more without working on a major piece of writing’ is clearly incorrect.89 Jack Beasley, in his response to Modjeska, counts one book of reportage, three plays, one pamphlet, one story collection and two novels written during that time. ‘Obviously, loafing on the job,’ he quips.90

More importantly, Modjeska, like Ellis, tends to conflate the fully-fledged theory of socialist realism promulgated by the CPA in the post-World War Two period with the far less developed formulations of the thirties, an error that allows Beasley to ridicule the idea that Prichard returned from the Soviet Union with ‘a foreign literary curse, a chancre called socialist realism’.91

Upon her return to Australia, Prichard did help establish the Writers’ League, an organisation modelled on the Soviet body,92 and at its first meeting, the League did table a report of the speeches from the Soviet Writers’ Congress.93 But, as David Carter argues, ‘there is little evidence to suggest that socialist realism arrived in Australia intact [and] little evidence that it was present as a method or a style rather

88 Ellis, p. 15.
89 Ellis., p. 134.
91 Beasley., p. 143.
93 Wells, p. 530.
than a broad set of ideals or a critical rhetoric. Indeed, as Beasley notes, the term ‘socialist realism’ almost never appears in Prichard’s writing.

The substance of Modjeska’s case stands, however, even if it needs to be slightly reformulated. Phrased more carefully, the argument is not that Prichard’s work was shaped by what Zhdanov said socialist writers should do (something that remained unclear even into the forties) but rather that, after 1934, she accepted the right of the Soviet leaders to intervene politically into questions of literature.

One of the key speeches at the Writers’ Congress came from Karl Radek, who delivered an extraordinary polemic against modernism in general and James Joyce in particular. He asked:

What is the basic feature in Joyce? His basic feature is the conviction that there is nothing big in life – no big events, no big people, no big ideas; and the writer can give a picture of life by just taking ‘any given hero on any given day,’ and reproducing him with exactitude. A heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope: such is Joyce’s work.

Radek’s attack on modernism partly reflected the role of socialist realism in the Soviet Union where, as has been argued, the Stalinist authorities required a literature formally simple enough to reach a mass readership amongst an undereducated bureaucracy. Joyce’s complex puns and obscure allusions were simply not appropriate for a readership of managers and officials desperately seeking to become ‘cultured’.

But Radek’s polemic was also part of the communist leadership’s new assertion of control over literature, and a conscious warning to foreign communists. Radek was, of course, an Old Bolshevik, who had lived for many years in Germany, where he had acquired a passion for European literature and a reputation for literary brilliance. But he had briefly supported Trotsky before capitulating in 1930, and thereafter desperately sought to prove his loyalty to Stalin. Radek’s denunciation of Joyce sent a message that the free-thinking, cosmopolitan European intellectualism of the older generation of Marxists would no longer be tolerated. The ‘mighty army’ was

95 Beasley A Gallop of Fire, p. 143.
96 Radek, p. 153.
now under discipline – a point reiterated when Radek (along with two of the other main speakers at the congress) was arrested only a few years later.

Joyce had exerted a tremendous influence on young Australian writers around the Communist Party during the twenties. By the early thirties, though many (like those organised into the Workers Art Clubs) were moving towards realist techniques, most still continued a productive dialogue with modernism. Many WAC members contributed, for instance, to *Stream*, a journal which, as David Carter argues, was committed to ‘a broad modernism that would embrace symbolism, post-impressionism, surrealism, Eliot and Pound, Huxley and Lawrence.’

The First Soviet Writers’ Congress transformed this broad modernism from a source of techniques and ideas with which progressive writers might engage (even if critically) into an antagonistic political tendency that communists were called upon to combat. Judah Waten’s evolution provides an interesting example of the process. In 1930, Waten wrote his first, unpublished novel, *Hunger*, an experimental communist text which was strongly influenced by Joyce. In 1945, by contrast, he published a defence of realism in which, as Carter puts it, ‘Lawrence, Pound, Celine, Wyndham Lewis, Roy Campbell and T. S. Eliot are exposed as enemy agents.’

As Modjeska notes, Katharine Susannah Prichard’s early novels (in particular, *Working Bullocks*) display her political commitment in ways that could later be assimilated into socialist realist terms. The younger Prichard was, however, also a self-consciously experimental writer – and it was this aspect of *Working Bullocks* that most struck Nettie Palmer when she read the book for the first time:

> no one else has written with quite that rhythm, or seen the world in quite that way. The creative lyricism of the style impresses me more than either the theme or the characters.  

Prichard was, at that stage, critically engaged with European modernism, and *Working Bullocks* specifically reflects her enthusiasm for D. H. Lawrence with whom she corresponded. Modjeska argues that Prichard’s early novels, like Lawrence’s:

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98 Carter., p. 55.
drew heavily on poetic metaphor to explain the realms of instinct and passion. This tradition of romanticism stressed the human relationship to the natural world, celebrating its richness, its vitality, its sensuality.\footnote{Modjeska, p. 135.}

After 1934, the ‘creative lyricism’ Palmer had so admired became, along with D. H. Lawrence, far more politically problematic – even as the (to Palmer) less impressive themes (class struggle, the centrality of the Communist Party) and characters (including a communist militant) were retrospectively assimilated in Zhdanovite terms.

Prichard was, after all, a senior party figure, a foundation member of the CPA who joined its central committee in 1943.\footnote{Throssell \textit{Wild Weeds and Wind Flowers}, p. 117.} As the party’s most prominent and experienced literary representative, she was expected to argue an orthodox line on cultural matters.\footnote{She eventually explicitly disavowed Lawrence’s influence. See Throssell, R. (ed.) \textit{Straight Left: Articles and Addresses on Politics, Literature and Women’s Affairs over Almost 60 Years, from 1910 to 1968}, Wild & Woolley, Sydney, 1982, p. 177.} Gavin Casey recalled that, whenever Prichard went to a literary function:

> the word spread quickly that Katharine’s coming and the attendance [at meetings] shot up. Those who were opposed to her political views came to tear her to small shreds. Those who agreed with them felt that with the champion on their side they’d have a night of nights, after which the enemy would be licking their wounds for weeks.\footnote{Nile, R. \textit{The Making of a Really Modern Witch: Katharine Susannah Prichard 1919-1969}, Working Papers in Australian Studies, no. 56, Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, University of London, London, 1990, p. 7.}

Clearly, Prichard’s status put her under tremendous political pressure to oppose – and to be seen to oppose – modernism and associated trends, not just in her speeches but in her own writing. It is in this light that Modjeska’s assessment of Prichard’s later fiction should be assessed:

> There is an enormous tension, in Katharine Prichard’s early novels, between her romanticism, her Australianism and her Communism and it is there that their creative power and their vibrancy is to be found; in the tension between the passion of the
place and the austerity of her politics … This tension is missing in [her later novels]. A resolution had been found in the theory and practice of socialist realism.\textsuperscript{104}

Space does not permit a detailed reading of Prichard’s novels, but the transformation of realism from a particular literary technique to a signifier of ideological loyalty clearly impacted on Prichard’s fiction. As Carole Ferrier argues, socialist realism ‘was often in essence a policy of literary censorship’ – and literary censorship does not make for good writing.\textsuperscript{105}

For other writers, socialist realism proved more fruitful. Before looking specifically at Prichard’s biographical and autobiographical work, it is important to briefly explore other experiences of socialist realism in order to understand the ambiguities and contradictions of Stalinist literary production.

\textsuperscript{104} Modjeska, p. 135.
The contradictions of Stalinist literary production in Australia: the case of Frank Hardy

Modjeska only briefly acknowledges the ‘very real benefits’ some writers found in membership of the Communist Party, and her explanation of Stalinism’s impact on Prichard’s writing needs to be fleshed out, if only to counter the (mostly implicit but sometimes explicit) argument running throughout Beasley’s response – that opponents of socialist realism are simply hostile to politically-committed writing.

It has been argued above that the Stalinisation of the Comintern led to its national sections acting primarily as agents of Moscow’s foreign policy. But the developments that consolidated Stalin’s control over the world movement also set in train countervailing tendencies. The Stalinist dogma of ‘socialism in one country’, for example, necessarily fostered nationalist trends in the foreign communist parties. If a socialist society could be achieved within the boundaries of backward Russia, it was presumably even more possible to build it within an advanced industrialised economy like Germany or France or Australia. If that were the case, there was nothing to prevent the Comintern splintering along national lines, a development Trotsky predicted as early as 1928.106

The Popular Front strategy, with its insistence on alliances between communist parties and the middle class, exacerbated the tendency. Ernest Mandel describes how:

[i]Increasingly integrating themselves into the bourgeois state and amassing the material advantages to be won within bourgeois-parliamentary democracy as a result of their electoral and trade union successes, the apparatuses of the Communist parties in the ‘democratic’ imperialist countries began to come under material pressure independent of and to some extent antagonistic to the pressure of the Kremlin. If ‘socialism in one country’ led to national communism, the theory and practice of the

Popular Front led to a political line which fuelled a gradual process of Social Democratisation.\textsuperscript{107}

The history of the Communist Party of Australia from the early thirties to its dissolution in 1991 can be understood in terms of these two contradictory elements.\textsuperscript{108} On the one hand, its leaders remained unwaveringly loyal to the bureaucracy of the Soviet Union, a bureaucracy to which they owed their own positions and from which they received funding and (more importantly) ideological legitimacy. On the other, the day-to-day practice of the party – its commitment to electoralism, its penchant for operating through respectable fronts, its growing ties with the union bureaucracy – exerted pressure to function like a traditional social democratic party such as the Australian Labor Party.\textsuperscript{109}

Much of the time, the party’s political practice and the leadership’s loyalty to the Soviet Union remained more or less compatible. The two tendencies did, however, intermittently come into opposition – sometimes violently – and such clashes help explain the party’s occasional sudden policy jags (in particular, during the years leading up to World War Two) and the regularity of its internal crises, including the debates over the Hitler-Stalin pact, the Khrushchev speech, the invasion of Hungary and so on. These contradictions must be understood if the CPA’s relationship to literature is to be grasped.

The Communist Party leadership’s loyalty to Moscow meant that it subscribed to Zhdanov’s ideas in full. After 1934, the Communist Party in Australia accepted both the basic division between a progressive realism and a decadent modernism, and the right of party leaders to intervene in literary matters – even if, throughout the thirties, that right was rarely exercised. Systematic consideration of literature in the leading circles of the Australian party began only after World War Two. The bureaucracy in the USSR responded to the turmoil produced both by the war against Germany and the threat of a new war against the United States by stridently reasserting its control over literary production. Zhdanov attacked literary journals that were:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{108} It is this contradiction that is central to understanding communism – a point overlooked by the traditional historians of communism who ascribe all its doings simply to the Kremlin, as well as by the so-called revisionist school which stresses the relative autonomy of the individual communist sections.
\textsuperscript{109} See, on this general point, O’Lincoln, p. 39.
\end{flushleft}
giving space to cheap modern bourgeois literature from the West. Some of our men of letters began looking on themselves as not the teachers but the pupils of petty-bourgeois writers, and began to adopt an obsequious and awestruck attitude towards foreign literature. Is such obsequiousness becoming in us Soviet patriots who have built up the Soviet order, which towers higher a hundredfold, and is better a hundredfold, than any bourgeois order? Is obsequiousness towards the cheap and philistine bourgeois literature of the West becoming in our advanced Soviet literature, the most revolutionary in the world?\textsuperscript{110}

This was the context in which socialist realism was first systematically promulgated in Australia. Not surprisingly, the Australian party’s cultural work contained an implicit authoritarianism which, when combined with its theoretical crudities, often produced disastrous results. To give merely one of the better known examples, in 1953 the party leadership savagely attacked the Australasian Book Society (ABS) – a publication and distribution venture launched by CPA members – over its publication of Sally and Frank Bannister’s trilogy, \textit{Tossed and Blown}. Instead of highlighting a ‘positive hero’, the first volume portrayed its working-class characters in a less than flattering light. \textit{Tribune} expressed its displeasure, with party leader Len Fox arguing:

\begin{quotation}
It’s a false idea to show men squashing lice in a filthy jungle, or men involved in commercial rackets, and to say this is realism, this is progressive …
\end{quotation}

Party members lambasted the work for its alleged ‘bad writing’, for ‘maintaining a degenerate theme’ and exerting an ‘influence on many people [that] would be the same as vicious comics on children’, before party leader J. D. Blake closed the discussion with the inevitable quotation from Stalin about engineering human souls and a stern denunciation of the comrades in charge of the ABS.\textsuperscript{111}

But just as the party’s day-to-day political practice produced its own dynamic, relatively independent of Moscow, so the application of Zhdanovism developed a certain autonomy from the theory which informed it. The Australian party leadership

necessarily endorsed any direct statements on cultural policies or theory issuing from the Soviet leadership. But Soviet pronouncements tended to refer directly only to Soviet literature. The leadership was most concerned about social control within the Soviet Union and it therefore monitored Soviet writers carefully. Its interest in foreign writers, on the other hand, centred on their attitudes to the USSR and their usefulness to Soviet foreign policy. Inevitably, it paid much less attention to close readings of their novels.

To foster support for the war effort in World War Two, the USSR had encouraged Russian nationalism, a decision theorised in Zhdanovist terms by a new emphasis on the importance of national characteristics in literature. Australian communists dutifully followed, explicitly trying to situate socialist realism within a tradition stretching back to the nationalist writers around the Bulletin in the 1890s such as Lawson and Furphy. Paradoxically, their loyalty to the Soviet Union’s new position on nationalism provided Australian communists with even more autonomy, since the Soviet commissars found it harder (and less worthwhile) to lay down fixed strictures for the interpretation of a national literary tradition with which they were barely familiar.

The contradiction between the two elements shaping the Communist Party of Australia (its ties with the Soviet ruling class, on the one hand; its social democratic practice, on the other) therefore opened up contradictions in the field of literature, as the theoretical commitment to Zhdanovism was interpreted within the realities of the Australian political situation. As David Carter puts it:

Socialist realist theory set broad boundaries, prescribing realist priorities in subject matter and plot, proscribing ‘formalism’ and ‘subjectivism’, and favouring ‘typicality’ and ‘positive heroes’ (characters and situations which exemplified the true progress of history). The primary task of fiction was to portray the essential characteristics of ‘our time’. Otherwise, below the level of theory and policy, the meaning of socialist realism had to be re-invented for each novel, for each story.\(^\text{113}\)

\(^{112}\) On the communist reception of Lawson, in particular, see Lee, C. City Bushman: Henry Lawson and the Australian Imagination, Curtin University Books, Fremantle, 2004.

This relative autonomy enabled the CPA’s cultural practice to play, in many regards, a more valuable role than its underlying theoretical bankruptcy might have suggested. The party’s intervention into the Australasian Book Society might have been authoritarian and inept but, without the party, the ABS would not have been possible – and, at its height, the society was responsible for one third of the new fiction titles published in Australia.114 Even the controversy around Tossed and Blown had its positive aspects, as John Docker argues:

Many ordinary members of the party felt they could join in these debates about the nature and function of literature. Certainly the opinions of leading members like J. B. Miles and J. D. Blake were featured prominently in Tribune, and as party leaders their attitude was to some degree disciplinarian … Yet, like the ‘ordinary’ party members, they felt confident as self-educated working-class people that they had the ability and right to discuss questions of typicality in ‘character’, of how novels should be constructed in realist terms, or to compare recent realism to the strengths and limitations of Lawson’s 1890s realism. Further, they felt that the Australasian Book Society was their society – that they had the right to read and discuss and criticise ABS books – that this right was not the exclusive privilege of specialised ‘literary critics’ (whom they’d probably never heard of).115

From 1935 onwards, and particularly after World War Two, the Communist Party fostered an array of literary bodies such as the Fellowship of Australian Writers, the Writers’ League, the Realist Writers’ Groups and the Australasian Book Society. Though the initial impetus for the CPA’s intervention into culture came, undeniably, from the Soviet Writers’ Congress, the organisations that emerged in Australia proved surprisingly useful to many authors. They brought novice writers together and allowed them to discuss their work. They created a readership of mostly self-educated working-class people, and provided them with a vocabulary to discuss the literary productions of party-affiliated writers, while the party’s explicit nationalism facilitated a rapprochement with non-communists, who were far more enthusiastic about Henry Lawson than Andrei Zhdanov.116

115 Docker, p. 212.
One way, therefore, to accurately situate Prichard’s writing within the contradictions of communist literary production in Australia is to directly compare her situation with that of another writer for whom the experience of socialist realism was much more positive. Frank Hardy was one of a number of younger communist writers (a group that included Eric Lambert, Ralph de Boissière, David Martin, John Morrison, Dorothy Hewett, John Manifold, Jean Devanny, Joan Clarke and Vera Deacon) who learnt their craft from within the communist literary infrastructure – and in particular, the Realist Writers’ Groups. As Jenny Hocking notes, the Melbourne Realist Writers ‘gave Hardy direction and technique [schooling] him in a formalism he had not known before and [allowing him to develop] as a writer, eventually gaining the confidence to move beyond its confines and to adopt his own iconoclastic interpretation of socialist realism.’¹¹⁷

The crucial facilitator for this move was a specific intervention into the Australian political situation: *Power Without Glory*, Hardy’s first novel. This was initially commissioned by Ted Hill, a senior Victorian leader of the Communist Party, not as a work of literature but as a political gambit. In 1945 or 1946, Hill convinced his fellow CPA leader Ralph Gibson that an account of the life and career of the Labor powerbroker John Wren would dent the effectiveness of the Catholic Right within the labour movement. According to Les Barnes, another party member, Gibson approached him and proposed that:

we should write a book based on historical material which would expose John Wren and all these activities, but it should not be an ordinary straight book because that would be open to libel charges and court cases.

He suggested the book should be written on the lines of Upton Sinclair, an American writer; it should tell the truth, but use names close to the people. The truth should be such that the people would not be game to take court action. Well, it did not appeal to me at all; I said, ‘No, I wasn’t a novelist, I was a writer, whatever I wrote was history, and it was factual. It was either factual or it was propagandist, but it was not a distortion of the truth. But, I will tell you what I will do, I will research the material for you and while I’m researching the material, I’ll get others to do it, and when you find a bloke to do the job, we will turn the material over to him.’¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Hocking, p. 40.
The ‘bloke’ eventually found to do the job was, of course, Frank Hardy. As a communist and an aspiring writer, Hardy, upon accepting the commission, consciously and conscientiously tried to apply the doctrines of socialist realism to his task. But the politics of the mission he had been given, in Jenny Hocking’s words, stretched ‘the party’s view of socialist realism to its limits’.119

Just as the party’s political development was shaped by the contradiction between, on the one hand, its social democratic practice and, on the other, its loyalty to the Soviet Union, socialist realism in Australia manifested a tension between Zhdanovite theory and immediate political experience. In Power Without Glory, the second tendency proved predominate.

The point of Hill’s scheme lay in the exposé of John Wren, a matter of some importance in the CPA’s struggles in the unions. Wren, then, clearly had to play a central role in Hardy’s book, which would necessarily be devoted to chronicling his misdeeds. But what did this mean for one of the central tenets of post-war Zhdanovism – the convention of the positive hero? In theory, the socialist realist writer should, first and foremost, depict a hero whose struggle portrayed the working class in general, and the Communist Party in particular, in an inspiring light. The contradiction between Hardy’s immediate political objectives and the Zhdanovism to which he ostensibly subscribed was obvious. If he wanted to expose Wren’s corruption as an ongoing and real danger about which something needed to be done, then Wren (West) would need to be the focus of the novel – and there would be no room for the positive protagonist of socialist realism.

The strain that the political imperatives of Power Without Glory placed on the party’s theoretical framework became evident in the subsequent attempts to assimilate Hardy’s widely successful novel in Zhdanovite terms. For instance, the party’s main literary critic, Jack Beasley, decided in 1954 that the novel could only be considered as ‘critical realism’ rather than ‘socialist realism’:

Despite its strength, Power Without Glory does not attain the level of socialist realism … The ‘hero’ of Power Without Glory is a degenerate person, as the author convincingly demonstrates. The working class enters the novel only indirectly, in relation to West and his ambitions … The book is blunted by the negative role

119 Hocking, p. 40.
allotted to the proletariat, for great literature could not be written of such a sorry ‘hero’ as West.120

David Martin raised a similar argument.121 Both critics ignored the reason why Hardy’s novel took the particular form that it did – namely, that it was shaped, probably more than any novel in Australian literary history, by a particular political purpose, and its engagement with those political realities proved more important than the dictates of Zhdanovism.

There was another, perhaps deeper, sense in which the pragmatics of *Power Without Glory* brought Hardy into conflict with Zhdanovism. From their earliest discussions of the project, Hill and Gibson wanted the book to be based on accurate biographical information about John Wren, information that Hardy and others spent years accumulating. As the communist leader J. B. Miles put it in a letter to Hardy before the book’s publication, ‘though presented as fiction – and no doubt many details are so – it is a thinly disguised biography, even about many secondary and some minor characters.’122

The party leaders recognised the necessity for the text to cloak itself as fiction – for legal, rather than aesthetic, reasons. As John Frow notes, the relationship between literature and life, relatively unproblematic in Zhdanov’s writings, became a key question when Hardy faced charges of criminal libel:

In order to defend the novel [Hardy] was obliged to stress its difference from life, its fictionality. The prosecution, on the other hand, was in the position of having to defend a proposition that was simultaneously true and false. In order to identify the character ‘John West’ as being a representation of John Wren they went so far as to introduce as exhibits the ‘real chair’ and the ‘real’ print of Beethoven described in the novel. At the same time they needed to deny that Wren had committed any of the crimes attributed to West – and this involved a substantial portion of the book.123

The questions raised in the *Power Without Glory* trial continued to haunt Hardy, especially as doubts crept into his attitude to the Soviet Union. In the

120 Beasley, J. ‘Fourth Anniversary of Power Without Glory’ in Beasley *Journal of an Era*, pp. 33-4. Note that Beasley retracted this judgement a few years later.
122 Hocking, p. 65.
autobiographical The Hard Way (a book dominated by the writing of Power Without Glory), he began to more consciously explore both the complexities of life-writing and the complexities of representation – what he termed ‘the irreconcilable feud between literature and reality’. Throughout the rest of his career, Hardy remained fascinated by the relationship between fact and fiction, particularly in relation to autobiography. His work is littered with various authorial counterparts – Ross Franklyn, Frank Hardy, Billy Borker and Truthful Jones – whom he uses to complicate the telling of his own truth. His problematisation of the nature of realism accompanied a sense that the Communist Party had not portrayed the truth about the Soviet Union, and that this was a process in which he had been complicit:

I first visited Moscow in 1951. I saw what I wanted to see and wrote a book called Journey into the Future … With a whole generation of idealists I was caught in the web of Stalinism.124

Space does not permit discussion of the complex exploration of biography, realism and Stalinism that runs throughout Frank Hardy’s corpus. But even this brief consideration of his career draws out the contradictions of Australian Zhdanovism – contradictions that meant, in certain circumstances, that the theory could be surprisingly productive.

It is now possible to return to Katharine Susannah Prichard to examine the very different effects of socialist realism on her biographical and autobiographical writing.

Katharine Susannah Prichard and the Great Family of Stalinism

It has been argued that socialist realism in Australia developed through the interaction of two contradictory tendencies, paralleling the basic political contradictions underlying the development of Australian communism. The CPA was buffeted by, on the one hand, its unswerving loyalty to the Soviet Union and, on the other, its day-to-day political practice, which from the thirties onwards became increasingly similar to that of a social democratic party like the ALP. In a similar fashion, communist writers engaging with socialist realism felt a tension between their reliance on Soviet literary authorities and their own experiences of political/literary struggles in Australia.

The process by which Frank Hardy’s involvement in the *Power Without Glory* project developed socialist realism in interesting and unexpected ways has been discussed. By contrast, Katharine Susannah Prichard’s abiding loyalty to the leadership of the Soviet Union created more and more problems in her writing.

As has been argued above, Prichard – a party leader and important cultural figurehead – was, after 1934, expected to both publicly defend and exemplify the party’s political line on literature. In many ways, she enjoyed more latitude in her fiction than in her biographical and autobiographical writing, simply because her novels were not as likely to attract the attention of the Soviet leaders. She was able to oppose, for instance, those Russian critics who attacked her goldfields trilogy for affording insufficient attention to communist organisation in the mining districts by pointing out that the CPA had almost no influence in the area during the period in which her books were set: ‘May I say, to begin with, if you please, that I do not believe a writer of socialist realism should falsify reality.’

Her situation was much more problematic when it came to non-fiction since, as a high-profile and senior party member, she was often called upon to write on subjects of especial significance to the Soviet leadership. In 1945, for instance, the CPA published a collection of the essays of Maxim Gorky, and Prichard was directed to produce a biographical introduction. Gorky was, of course, a major Russian

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novelist who at one stage had been personally friendly with Lenin. Gorky had, however, opposed the revolution in 1917, criticised the early Bolshevik regime and eventually fled into exile. In 1928, in a considerable propaganda coup, Stalin induced him to return to the Soviet Union. Thereafter, Gorky lent his literary reputation to the promulgation of socialist realism and remained throughout his lifetime a loyal propagandist for Stalin. His biography was therefore an issue of some significance to the Soviet regime – on a par, perhaps, with the regularly adjusted biographies of the leaders of the CPSU themselves.

On a question of such importance, orthodoxy was essential. The CPA at that time simply could not have published a biography that did not obscure the circumstances of Gorky’s departure from the Soviet Union, nor could it challenge the Soviet insistence that all setbacks in the creation of socialism resulted from the machinations of wreckers and saboteurs. Prichard’s task in producing an introduction to *Creative Labour and Culture* was therefore politically very sensitive.

Prichard dutifully explains that ‘Gorky’s health had been causing serious anxiety to his friends in Russia, and at Lenin’s insistence, he went abroad for treatment in 1921.’\(^{126}\) She denies suggestions that Gorky had succumbed to the tuberculosis with which he had been ill for years, and instead insists that he was ‘put to death by unscrupulous blackguards in 1936 because his activities interfered with their scheme to overthrow the Soviet Government.’\(^{127}\)

Although Prichard’s introduction is brief, it is of particular interest as an illustration of the specific effects that the strongest forms of socialist realism produced in biographical writing.

Most of the attention of Soviet socialist realist theorists went to privileged modes like the novel or poetry; there was no explicit discourse on biographical technique. That did not mean, however, that biography was unimportant. Indeed, as Katerina Clark points out, the thirties in the Soviet Union were:

> an age when it seemed that virtually everyone who put pen to paper was writing a heroic biography of one of the official heroes (a member of the Stalinist leadership, a Civil War hero, a leader figure from the national past, like Emelian Pugachev, or a symbolic hero). Whichever of the standard subjects was chosen for a biography, an


\(^{127}\) Gorky, p. 15.
important function of the book would be to rationalise the status quo and legitimise
the current leadership. 128

Clark argues that the approved techniques for writing socialist realist fiction and
biography were largely interchangeable since, in the Soviet Union, ‘all biographies
were … standardised so that every subject’s life, in both fiction and non-fiction, fit
mythicised patterns.’ 129 The Soviet hagiographies served as models for novelists and
vice-versa, particularly in regard to the presentation of the notorious socialist realist
‘positive hero’.

Clark’s structural analysis of the iconography of Soviet socialist realism
identifies a series of roles for characters within what she calls the myth of the Great
Family:

This myth described Soviet society and history in terms of an ongoing hierarchy of
‘fathers’, or highly ‘conscious’ members of the vanguard, and ‘sons’ or highly
’spontaneous’ positive figures who were nurtured to political consciousness by the
‘fathers’. 130

Accounts of Stalin or other ‘politically conscious’ figures were tales of
Fathers. Accounts of lesser lights, generally produced in order to provide the populace
with characters to emulate, were stories of Sons, who could only attain full
consciousness once their naivety or rashness had been tempered by guidance from a
Father.

This is the context for understanding Prichard’s introduction to the Gorky
pamphlet. The need to write a life of Gorky that is politically acceptable to the Soviet
authorities pushes Prichard to closely follow the Soviet models of socialist realism.
Her Gorky is therefore a politically conscious and wise Father. His status is
emphasised by the presence of a Son (in this case, female) – Nina Oks, who had
known Gorky in her childhood before she emigrated to Australia.

Prichard’s representation of Gorky rests on what Clark describes as a Stalinist
‘alphabet’, a ‘system of terse signs with standardised meanings [indicating] the

128 Clark The Soviet Novel, p. 122.
129 Clark, p. 123.
130 Clark, K. ‘Socialist Realism with Shores’ in Lahuusen, T. and Dobrenko, E. (eds) Socialist Realism
moral/political qualities and symbolic roles of its heroes.’ A Stalinist Father is loving, exuding a patriarchal warmth. He is also, when necessary, stern and severe. In Prichard’s presentation, Gorky is accordingly ‘beloved by the Soviet peoples’ and is recognised as a ‘great-hearted lover of life and humanity.’ She quotes Nina Oks’ recollection of how Gorky:

> often … would not talk at all, but seemed to like her to be there; and sometimes he would talk in the gay, whimsical style of his letters. Nina wishes she could remember all he said, but she was too young, and nothing more remains of that time than the memory of how she liked to be with Gorky, and what a delight it was when he talked to her as if she were a grown up person.\(^{131}\)

Alongside his paternal warmth, Gorky also manifests the other side of Clark’s stern/loving dualism:

> He fought uncompromisingly against all the enemies of the Soviet regime, within and outside the federated republics, criticising sloth and inefficiency where ever he found them, exposing sabotage with blazing wrath, flaying cowards, philistines and traitors with the lash of his bitter invective.\(^{132}\)

Gorky’s status as a Father manifests itself most clearly through his relationship with Nina. The advice he offers her as to how she can become ‘conscious’ as a good Soviet citizen involves an explicit claim of paternal status. Prichard describes how Nina:

> wrote to Gorky asking his advice. This was his reply: ‘Study as much as you can. Study for four years, or five if necessary. Contemporary science becomes more and more important as with greater breadth and depth it penetrates life, creating the basis of a real revolution in matter and spirit … Good-bye, my daughter. I bless you. Study above all.’ [italics mine]\(^{133}\)

Katerina Clark argues that:

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\(^{131}\) Prichard, K. S. ‘Introduction’ in Gorky, p. 7.

\(^{132}\) Prichard., p. 14.

\(^{133}\) Prichard, p. 10.
at the centre of all conventional Stalinist novels will be found the saga of an individual’s struggle for self-mastery, a struggle which stands in for society’s own reaching out toward self-realisation in a state of consciousness. As in much traditional myth, the individual (or son) is assisted in his struggle by a father figure who helps him win through in his quest, to combat the ‘spontaneous’ forces (eg: passions, enemies or self-centred bureaucrats that assail him from within or without).¹³⁴

In Prichard’s introduction, Nina is still in the midst of this struggle for self-mastery, a process derailed by her unfortunate decision to emigrate from the Soviet Union, and so Prichard explicitly argues for the significance of Nina’s correspondence with Gorky on the basis that her letters ‘show Gorky’s influence on the development of a young friend’:

That influence which had such a powerful effect on the youth of his country when Gorky returned to the USSR and devoted the rest of his life to inspiring young and old for the service of all that Soviet culture and progress demanded.

‘I was a very ordinary person,’ Nina says. ‘I valued Gorky’s friendship and realised that he was a great man, but I did not understand the significance of events which were happening so close to me … I feel I have not fulfilled his expectations. I hope that I may be given another chance, and be able to work for the great scheme of reconstruction which is already beginning in the USSR.’¹³⁵

Interestingly, Prichard’s short biography scarcely acknowledges Gorky’s literary achievements. Insofar as it does, it refers to Gorky’s writing only in reference to his Fatherliness. Thus, one of the few books mentioned is, in fact, Gorky’s *Childhood*, adduced as evidence of his love for his biological son. In characteristic fashion, literature in Prichard’s text does not function as literature so much as a signifier of roles within the Stalinist Great Family. The implied indifference to artistic function corresponds to the strangely muted prose that Prichard herself adopts for her introduction – a determinedly non-literary style (recall Dobrenko’s ‘stylistic neutrality’) of short and simple sentences.

Prichard’s introduction to the Gorky collection illustrates how, in certain circumstances, the contradictions within the Australian communist movement could

¹³⁴ Clark ‘Socialist Realism with Shores’, p. 30.
foster the strongest forms of Zhdanovism. Where Hardy’s engagement in concrete political practice pushed him away towards a new and productive engagement with literary theory, Prichard’s obligation to identify with and publicly defend the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union meant that, when she wrote Gorky’s biography, she produced pure Soviet-style socialist realism.

The pressures upon her became even clearer when she came to write her own life.
Katharine Susannah Prichard’s divided autobiography

In Modjeska’s argument, the quality of Prichard’s novels suffers when the tension between realism and the poetic romanticism in her early writing is resolved into socialist realism. A similar argument might be made about her autobiographical work – except that in it, the resolution comes in more dramatic fashion, culminating in a remarkable split between the very elements socialist realism was supposed to unite.

Prichard began writing her memoirs in August 1951 in order to defend herself against hostile critics who dubbed her, in the words of a Western Australian postgraduate student, ‘a propagandist not a literary artist’.136 As her son recalled, she decided to write an autobiography after reading the final version of the student’s treatise on her life and work:

‘Even in the rough they [the memoirs] should be done – to counteract the stupidities and misrepresentations of callow commentators,’ she fumed … 137

She was similarly offended by a lecturer in English at the University of Sydney, G. A. Wilkes, who attacked her for ‘pos[ing] so intolerably about conscription, profiteering and trade unionism’.138 Wilkes’ response – with its implicit assumption that political and social issues were foreign to fiction – was, of course, exactly the argument socialist realism intended to counter. The basis of Zhdanovism was, after all, the assertion that political commitment and aesthetic achievement were not counterposed but complementary (perhaps even identical), since a true depiction of reality necessarily entailed a representation of the heroism of communism.

Prichard’s attempt to use autobiography to defend the unity of politics and literature in her life and her work proved much more difficult than she might have expected. Five years later, after little progress, she confessed to her son:

I’m still not very interested in writing about myself. Dislike the personal pronoun – the ‘I … I …’ constantly creeping in. It all seems quite puerile and useless!139

137 Throssell, p. 174.
138 Throssell, p. 166.
139 Throssell, p. 181.
Her work on the memoir only became urgent and important in 1956. Why then? Stalin had died in 1953, prompting a short but vicious power struggle in Moscow. The new Soviet leadership tried to consolidate its own support with something of a political thaw that, alongside a series of minor liberalisations, involved a secret speech by the new leader Nikita Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 denouncing Stalin’s crimes. A transcript soon appeared in the *New York Times*, and its effect on the Communist Party of Australia (and indeed communist parties throughout the world) was immense.

In Australia, Khrushchev’s speech brought the party’s relationship with the Soviet Union into sharp contradiction with its social democratic practice. Traditional social democratic parties are not forced by developments overseas to revise, almost overnight, long-held opinions, and 1956 sent the CPA into crisis. Party leaders first denied reports of the speech and then did their utmost to minimise discussion of its ramifications.\(^{140}\) *Tribune* on 29 February 1956 simply condemned what it called the ‘Press Lies on Stalin,’ and assured its readers that the real revelation from the 20th Congress involved the continued advance of the latest Five Year Plan.\(^{141}\) *Tribune* on 4 April was forced to acknowledge what it called the ‘cult of the individual’ around Stalin, even thought it continued to attack mainstream accounts of Khrushchev’s speech as ‘a hell’s brew from the sewers of the gutter press.’\(^{142}\) On 11 April, with the party’s line in complete disarray and its members surreptitiously reading Khrushchev’s transcript in public libraries, *Tribune* presented a long article entitled ‘Why I Am A Communist’ by Katharine Susannah Prichard. The next year that article became a longer pamphlet published under the same title by the Communist Party, as the party struggled to deal with a second crisis after the Soviet Union invaded Hungary to suppress a working-class uprising.

The purpose of Prichard’s memoir is clear, both in its initial form as an excerpt (after the Khrushchev speech) and in its later manifestation as a pamphlet (in the wake of Hungary). It is intended as an intervention – but an intervention of a very different kind to Frank Hardy’s *Power Without Glory*. Hardy’s book, as an engagement with Australian political realities, pushed him away from Soviet-style

\(^{140}\) See O’Lincoln, p. 96.
socialist realism, and into a complex, lifelong meditation on truth, biography and identity. By contrast, Prichard wrote ‘Why I Am a Communist’ as a gesture of loyalty to the Stalinist regime, at a time when the faith of many loyal Communist Party members was being shaken to the core.

Prichard was not Gorky and, since her history was not caught up with the mythology of the Soviet state in the way that Gorky’s career was, the telling of her own life did not require the strong form of Soviet socialist realism she adopted for *Creative Labour and Culture*. Nonetheless, the fidelity she displayed to the Soviet Union was still integrally connected to a loyalty to Soviet aesthetic principles. The Soviet leaders had, after all, responded to critics of the Hungarian invasion with an offensive against what they called ‘revisionism’. As one Soviet ideologue put it:

> The fate of [Hungarian] ‘critics’ of socialist realism … convincingly demonstrates how revisionism by the very logic of things evolves into direct betrayal. Revisionism in aesthetics is inseparable from revisionism in politics.  

Prichard’s fight against revisionism in politics therefore involved a stance against revisionism in aesthetics. Her pamphlet is thus structured in a similar fashion to typical Soviet Stalinist biographies which, as Clark notes, involve certain set-piece scenes. Party leaders are invariably shown overcoming an impoverished childhood, obtaining an education only with difficulty and displaying, from an early age, the character traits that presage their ultimate greatness. Accordingly, Prichard’s pamphlet explains how ‘the furniture had to be sold because father and she [Prichard’s mother] had very little money.’ It tells how ‘father and mother had to think of the education of my brothers and sister by then … and could not afford to leave me at school any longer.’ And it attributes Prichard’s political career to an alleged intellectual independence, apparent even in her childhood:

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144 Prichard, K. S. *Why I Am a Communist*, p. 4.
145 Prichard, p. 5.
It had always been a curious and critical mind, it seems, seeking knowledge and refusing to be placated with unsatisfactory answers. Father used to say I was ‘born asking questions’.\textsuperscript{146}

More importantly, the pamphlet is structured by the fundamental socialist realist problematic of the journey towards political consciousness, with representatives of Prichard’s own family serving to prefigure her induction into the Stalinist Great Family of world communism. Her initial political wakening is thus driven by a desire to protect her immediate relations:

Suddenly, Mother’s grief [at her husband losing a job] led me to a realisation of it: of some dark mysterious trouble.

I must help her to prevent it hurting my younger brothers, baby sister, and father.\textsuperscript{147}

But her inquisitiveness quickly takes her beyond the political limitations of her biological parents, who are ‘disturbed … when I began to ask questions on [religious and political] matters’.\textsuperscript{148} Her brother’s death during the Great War fosters her ‘resolve to work for peace, and to oppose political and economic intrigues which foster the barbarous insanity of war.’\textsuperscript{149} Finally, her husband urges her ‘to take advantage of the opportunity’ to visit the USSR. That journey both allows Prichard to achieve full political consciousness (‘what I saw of the way men and women live and work in the Soviet Union proved to me that Marxist principles … were sound’\textsuperscript{150}) and, not coincidentally, entirely removes her husband from the narrative – a disappearance glossed over with a curt sentence explaining that ‘circumstances, which he had not foreseen, so undermined his health that I never saw him again.’\textsuperscript{151}

At that point, the biographical narrative abruptly ceases, since with political consciousness attained, nothing else remains to be said about Prichard’s life. The pamphlet segues into explanations of Stalinist doctrine and a homily about the virtues of the leaders of the Communist Party of Australia.

\textsuperscript{146} ibid.
\textsuperscript{147} Prichard, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{148} Prichard, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{149} Prichard, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{150} Prichard, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{151} ibid.
As in Prichard’s introduction to Gorky’s essays, literature as literature in *Why I Am a Communist* is rendered largely irrelevant, since books simply signify way stations on the journey to consciousness. Of her own writing, Prichard says, ‘when I left England I had achieved some success as a journalist, and my first novel won a prize.’ The only other reference to her literary career runs as follows:

I felt then [after her return to Australia] that I could devote myself to the literary work for which I had been equipping my mind for so long.

I could write about Australia and the realities of life for the Australian people.

But, with some knowledge of art, literature and economics, I still had only a vague humanitarian philosophy.

Then, crossing the Princes Bridge in Melbourne, one evening, I saw newspaper posters about the revolution in Russia.

Again, literature is transparent – a medium that, once it has been suitably informed by communist theory, simply expresses ‘the realities of life for the Australian people’ – and therefore is of no particular biographical interest. The form of the pamphlet replicates its content, with Prichard adopting the self-consciously simple and anti-literary style of her Gorky introduction.

While *Why I Am a Communist* might have served its immediate polemical purpose, a pamphlet that treated literature merely as a cipher for politics could do nothing in respect of her original goal of defending her literary reputation. Prichard therefore continued to work, very slowly and painfully, on a more substantial autobiographical project. ‘I am thoroughly disgusted and fed up with this MS,’ she wrote to her son. ‘I’ll be glad to get rid of it – only wish I’d never started on the document.’

The manuscript was not completed until 1961, when it was published as *Child of the Hurricane*. The contrast between *Why I Am a Communist* (published by the Communist Party) and *Child of the Hurricane* (published by Angus & Robertson) illustrates the strange division fostered by Stalinism. In her attempt to protect her literary reputation, Prichard returns to the preoccupations of her earlier and most acclaimed work, even to the extent of quoting, as a description of her childhood, long

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152 Prichard, p. 7.
153 ibid.
passages from her novel *The Wild Oats of Han*. Whereas the pamphlet strips writing of its literariness, *Child of the Hurricane* depends upon very traditional romantic tropes – most especially, the sublimity of nature – to stake a claim for Prichard’s artistic status.

The title refers to Prichard’s infancy in Fiji and the storm in which she was supposedly born:

Dawn threw wan light on the devastation caused by the hurricane; the township bashed and battered as though by a bombardment, the sea-wall washed away, the sea breaking through the main street, ships in the harbour blown ashore or on to the reef, coconut plantations beaten to the ground. But in that bungalow on the hillside, natives gazed with awe at the baby the hurricane had left in its wake.

‘Na Luve ni Cava,’ they exclaimed. ‘She is a child of the hurricane.’

It is an episode that fuses images of nature, primitivism and spirituality: elements which, throughout the book, are linked to Prichard’s creative powers. So, for example, an early attempt at landscape painting is interrupted by her tutor who advises her to stare at the sea for half an hour before setting to work:

Gazing at the sea, I was surprised to find that it was not all blue and green as I had taken for granted. I saw purple shadows thrown by the rocks, fading to amethyst; golden sands beneath translucent shallows; sapphire of the deep sea … Painting did not interest me greatly, but all was grist to the mill churning over in my mind. Mr Brookesmith’s was one of the most valuable lessons I received as a writer. It gave me new eyes for the vagaries of light and shadow; a more intense appreciation of the wonder and beauty of earth, sky and sea; an understanding of the need for concentration on the deeper meaning of things and people.

Where *Why I Am a Communist* sources literature in political theory (‘for ten years,’ she writes, ‘I studied these theories, taking each one in turn’), *Child of the Hurricane* identifies creativity with nature. In a discussion of her earliest writing – produced while living in the back country of New South Wales – Prichard writes:

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155 Throssell, p. 1.
156 Throssell, p. 68.
What a revelation that vast drought-stricken inland country was to a girl brought up in
the south with its bush greenery, timbered hills, fern gullies, fertile paddocks and
farms! I felt much older, and as if I had gained a great deal in my apprenticeship to
life and literature.158

The ‘transparent’ prose of the pamphlet has vanished; instead, Prichard adopts a self-
consciously writerly style to describe the Australian landscape:

It began raining at dawn, in a slow, steady downpour. By noon there were eighty-
three points. The creek, which is usually hardly more than a gully in the sand, flowed
briskly. It flooded. Right over the bare flats the water stretched in glistening sheets.
Among the trees the current eddied and swirled. The water was as red as the sand.

When I went along the veranda to bed, it was strange to see flood water instead of
the dead plains. In ghastly sheets it lay, shimmering among the creekside trees. A
fierce tumultuous sound the waters had as they rushed along. Some irresistible
triumphing joy, the unaccustomed noise made!159

Prichard’s resort to conventional romanticism (rather than Zhdanovite
‘revolutionary romanticism’) to explain and defend her creative work leads to a
corresponding absence of politics from her autobiography. The chosen timeframe (the
book concentrates on her childhood and early adulthood) contributes to this process.
But, even where Prichard writes of her later life, she goes out of her way to present
herself as a romantic rebel rather than as a disciplined member of the Communist
Party, an organisation which is barely mentioned.

The text is structured as a curious inversion of Why I Am a Communist: where
the earlier pamphlet gives Prichard’s life as a journey from domesticity into political
consciousness, Child of the Hurricane presents her political consciousness largely in
terms of her family life and, in particular, her relationship with Hugo Throssell.
Throssell is represented as an overwhelmingly sexual force. On his first encounter
with Prichard, he lifts her out of her ‘usual aloofness’ by insisting they go riding
together. The sexual connotation is obvious:

159 Prichard, p. 82.
‘Let’s go riding in Rotten Row,’ he proposed blithely, after we had been talking a little while. ‘You can ride, of course. I’ll get the horses.’

‘I haven’t a riding habit,’ I protested.

‘Never mind,’ he insisted. ‘You can fix a skirt on one leg and another on the other for divided skirts.’

‘But women don’t ride astride in the Row,’ I told him. ‘It’s just a parade of horses and riders in the most correct and decorous fashion.’

‘We’ll show them,’ Hugo declared happily, ‘how Australians can ride.’

The association with horses is part of a broader connection between Throssell’s sexuality, Prichard’s creativity and the natural world, particularly at its most extreme. Thus:

Jim was extraordinarily sensitive to the earth, animals and the people who worked with them. When the rains came, at the end of the summer, he would shout gaily to the skies: ‘Send her down! Send her down, Hughie!’ …

Virile and forthright, Jim was always a source of inspiration to me: a personification of Australia.

His sexuality is a manifestation of unbridled nature. When he is released from hospitalisation after combat, his love-making is like a ‘whirlwind.’ He comes to Prichard from ‘the maelstrom of war’; his return to the trenches leaves her with:

the memory of kisses and our last passionate embrace. Was it the end of this brief madness? … Would he ever return to overwhelm me again?

In a curious scene from their honeymoon, Throssell finds a portrait of Achilles in Prichard’s workroom. When he asks her about the picture, she explains that Achilles represents the embodiment of masculine beauty. Later:

I found him, on the kitchen table, one morning, in the pose of Achilles, holding the lid of the rubbish bin for a shield and a broomstick for a javelin.

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161 Prichard, p. 256.
162 Prichard, p. 217.
‘Won’t I do instead of that peanut?’ he queried.
Collapsing in laughter, I assured him he was the only peanut in the world for me.¹⁶³

In questioning the image of Achilles (which hangs in the room where Prichard writes), Throssell implicitly offers himself as a rival source of literary inspiration. By opposing the portrait, he asserts the primacy of living, sexualised nature over dead abstraction. The same juxtaposition appears again when, before their marriage, Prichard asks Throssell for a cork-lined case of Queensland butterflies as a wedding present:

I told him that I thought the passion of our love was like the colour and wings of the butterflies.
‘But they’re dead,’ he exulted, ‘and we’re alive!’
His tempestuous love-making made me feel there was nothing more important than to be alive and in love.¹⁶⁴

The opposition between abstraction, on the one hand, and life, nature and sexuality, on the other, has obvious political effects. One might expect, in a communist autobiography, sexual desire to be displaced into political commitment; instead, throughout Child of the Hurricane, politics is displaced into sexuality:

During those honeymoon months I gave Jim Engels’ Socialism Utopian and Scientific to read. As he sprawled over it on the verandah, often there would be a yell of: ‘Hell girl, what the blazes does this mean?’ I would go out to explain, his arms stretch out, and usually our political discussions end in love-making.¹⁶⁵

Or again:

I told Hugo my political beliefs and he accepted them with me. He was really a deliriously exciting and romantic lover.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Prichard, p. 253.
¹⁶⁴ Prichard, p. 251.
¹⁶⁵ Prichard, p. 254.
¹⁶⁶ Prichard, p. 251.
The contrast with *Why I Am a Communist* could not be greater. In the pamphlet, Throssell appears only insofar as he facilitates Prichard’s trip to the Soviet Union. In *Child of the Hurricane*, the Soviet trip features primarily as a separation from Throssell. She writes:

So I went overseas for six months, on the understanding that Jim would do nothing while I was away to make me regret leaving him. It was a terrible mistake.\(^{167}\)

Whether the mistake lay in trusting Jim or going to the Soviet Union remains open – an extraordinary ambiguity, and one that the pamphlet could not possibly have countenanced.

A comparison of the passages relating to Jim’s death is equally instructive. As has been noted, in *Why I Am a Communist*, Prichard argues explicitly that communism provides a consolation for her loss:

Only my belief in the need to work for the great ideas of communism and world peace helped me to survive a grief so shattering. Personal sorrow, I felt, is part of the world’s great sorrow, caused by war and an economic system which thrives on war and the preparations for war.\(^{168}\)

In *Child of the Hurricane*, she instead talks of her belief, not in communism, but in Throssell himself – even using the word ‘faith’:

I had absolute faith in him and don’t know how I survived the days when I realised I would never see him again. The end of our lives together is still inexplicable to me.\(^{169}\)

Whereas the pamphlet concludes with a tribute to the leaders of the CPA, *Child of the Hurricane* presents, instead, a paean to the dead Throssell:

To you, all these wild weeds
And wind flowers of my life,
I bring, my lord,

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\(^{167}\) Prichard., p. 261.

\(^{168}\) Prichard *Why I Am a Communist*, p. 9.

\(^{169}\) Prichard *Child of the Hurricane*, p. 261.
And lay them at your feet;
They are not frankincense
Or myrrh,
But you were Khrishna, Christ and Dionysus
In your beauty, tenderness and strength.\textsuperscript{170}

Prichard’s autobiography can thus make a case for her significance as a writer only by diminishing her significance as a communist. That Prichard realised this was a less than satisfactory conclusion seems clear. She wrote to her son:

[The manuscript] tells too much and not enough of your KS. Ending with marriage, and not giving the more important and mature development of my life. … It’s true enough as far as it goes – but doesn’t go far enough, I feel.\textsuperscript{171}

In his biography of his mother, Ric Throssell makes it clear that she never really understood the relationship between her two autobiographies:

Even when \textit{Child of the Hurricane} was finally completed, Katharine believed that all that was important went into \textit{Why I Am a Communist}, where she had spoken directly of the things that had formed her beliefs, without the personal reminiscences and ‘sweet nothings’ she thought necessary to make her autobiography palatable to the general public.\textsuperscript{172}

The failure of socialist realism had reached its zenith. Zhdanov’s promise to resolve the contradiction between political commitment and literature had, in fact, massively extended the gulf between them.

The same division will be seen again, in a rather different way, in Betty Roland’s autobiographical work.

\textsuperscript{170} ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} Throssell \textit{Wild Weeds and Wind Flowers}, p. 187.
\textsuperscript{172} Throssell., p. 184.
Betty Roland and Stalinism

It has been necessary to devote so much space to Stalinism’s impact on Katharine Susannah Prichard because Prichard remained a devoted Stalinist throughout her life, consciously subscribing to Zhdanovite aesthetic theory. Betty Roland, on the other hand, belonged to the communist movement for only five years or so, before breaking first with Stalinism and then with Marxism. Nonetheless, her experience as a communist remained of fundamental importance to her writing career and, throughout her body of autobiography, her relationship with Stalinism produces definite and interesting effects.

The brief time Roland and Prichard spent together in the Soviet Union can now be re-examined. As has been noted, Caviar for Breakfast describes an intimate discussion in which Prichard talks of her disillusionment. In that passage, Roland quotes Prichard on her feelings for Throssell and then comments that the Soviet Union has taught Prichard to ‘recognise [her husband’s worth] … I do not think that he will ever feel humiliated or excluded again’. For Nicole Moore, the passage seems to portend Throssell’s suicide, and she quotes it as ‘evidence of a reorganisation belied by the retention of the genre convention of a diary’.173

Certainly, Caviar for Breakfast is a much more mediated text than it seems – or, indeed, than Roland claims. After all, she introduces the 1989 edition by emphasising its immediacy. ‘The following account of that extraordinary year,’ she explains, ‘is based on a diary I kept at the time. I offer it as one woman’s view of a stupendous moment in history, aware of its limitations but with faith in its veracity.’174 But this purported immediacy is radically problematic. As Moore notes:

First published by Quartet in 1979, the Angus & Robertson Imprint version of 1989 is a reworking of both the original diary and the published version, but of course must camouflage this.175

175 Moore, p. 7.
The nature of the camouflage becomes clearer upon examination of the writings about the Soviet Union Roland produced immediately after returning to Australia. In 1935, she contributed an article entitled ‘Trade Unions in the USSR’ to *The Soviets Today*, the journal of the Friends of the Soviet Union. It begins:

How do the trade unions affect the lives of the workers in the USSR? Like the great majority who have never been there, I could not have given any conclusion before I visited the USSR and went to work under the conditions of the new society. 176

The short article rehearses in miniature form the familiar generic conventions of the Stalinist travel narrative. It is shaped by the journey narrative (‘Miss Betty Roland of Melbourne,’ the introduction explains, ‘has just returned from the Soviet Union’) and Roland plays the conventional role as the ‘traveller-narrator’ witnessing the new world. In a typical passage, she describes landing at:

the little ports that dot the coast where we saw happy groups of men and women strolling up and down under avenues of palm trees, swimming in the sea, playing tennis, lying in the sun, listening to music from the bands that played in the semi-tropic gardens; singing, laughing, burned to a ruddy copper by the southern sun, storing energy to face the long winter and the demands of the work of the year ahead. 177

Around the same time, Roland published a very similar piece in *Working Woman*, comparing abortion in Australia with abortion in the Soviet Union. Again, the text introduces her with the customary gesture to authority: she has ‘recently returned from a visit [to the Soviet Union]’. Her article begins with an account of a woman arrested in Caulfield for committing an ‘unlawful act’ and juxtaposes the incident with the conditions in Russia where, if a woman:

desires to have an abortion she goes to a clinic where a specially selected woman questions her kindly and sympathetically regarding her reasons. If the reasons are those of health, if either of the parents are suffering from a hereditary disease, if it is seen that the life or health of the mother will be endangered by bearing a child, there

177 ibid.
is no further argument; but if none of these reasons can be advanced, the expectant mother is sent home to think over her decision. At the end of the week, she comes back and if she is still of the same mind she is told to go to an ‘abortory’ at an appointed time.  

These two articles provide a view of Roland’s relationship to Stalinist Russia in 1935 which is quite different to that presented in the published version of *Caviar for Breakfast*. Unlike Katharine Prichard, Roland was not a communist before she went to the Soviet Union; rather, what she saw there inspired her sufficiently that she devoted herself to the Communist Party of Australia for some years. Almost certainly, had she published her book on the Soviet Union when she returned (as she clearly intended), it would have been shaped as a conventional Stalinist travel narrative.

Of course, this might explain why no such book appeared. It is possible that, while Roland was prepared to publish selective short accounts of her time in the Soviet Union so that she could engage in communist activity in Australia, she drew the line at publishing a full-scale narrative that could only have been dishonest.  

In any case, it is crucial when reading *Caviar for Breakfast* to understand that the published text only appeared some forty years after its composition and that, while aspects of the original Stalinist travel narrative remain, they are put, in the published book, to a very different use.

*Caviar for Breakfast* can now be read once more alongside Prichard’s *The Real Russia*. As has been discussed, both books use the journey to the Soviet Union as a framing device. In each case, the texts use a comparison of the differences between Western and Soviet ships as a metonym for the differences between social systems. In *The Real Russia*:

Some of the [sailors] were having dinner when we entered their dining room. George Hardy, an old British seaman, exclaimed to see the white cloth on their table.

‘They’re having the same dinner as we had,’ Tanya pointed out. 

180 Prichard *The Real Russia*, p. 6.
*Caviar for Breakfast* replays almost exactly the same scene, but for a different purpose:

There is no class distinction on the *Felix Dzherzhinsky*. Officers and crew mix feely with the passengers, sit at the same table, share the same food, join in the discussions and the fun and games in off-duty hours. Guido is delighted, seeing this as an example of the classless society.\(^{181}\)

Whereas for Prichard, Hardy is an authority (an old seaman, no less) to be taken seriously, for Roland, Baracchi’s enthusiasm is slightly ridiculous. This is a strategy repeated throughout *Caviar for Breakfast*, with most of the claims of the regime and its supporters slyly undercut in an implicit reversal of the value judgements of the travel narrative structure.

Roland’s criticisms of the Stalinist state are generally located in the personal and the private. She can be implicitly sceptical about Baracchi’s enthusiasm for the classless society on the *Felix Dzherzhinsky* because she is his lover, familiar with the intimate details of his life. This private register – unavailable in Prichard’s book – provides the space for an alternative version of what Roland sees. She dutifully joins the public veneration of the regime (in, for example, the May Day celebration); yet she also registers her horror at the communal toilets and the bed-bugs: ‘socialist realism in its purest form.’\(^{182}\) She studies Marxist writings on the class struggle with Baracchi, but at the shops where members of the old nobility sell their possessions, she hides an ‘enthusiasm for … relics of the past which, in [Baracchi’s] opinion, represent all that is decadent and sinful’.\(^ {183}\) She accepts that Soviet Russia has no unemployment, but secretly longs for ‘the delights of a thoroughly unproletarian bath.’\(^ {184}\)

In her study of Australian communist life-writing, Joy Damousi identifies an emphasis on the private and the personal rather than the public and political as characteristic of women’s autobiography:

\(^{182}\) Roland, p. 89.  
\(^{183}\) Roland, p. 25.  
\(^{184}\) Roland, p. 108.
While the men are primarily concerned to record external events of the public domain in a linear progression and deny the private domain of their feelings and relationships, the ‘public’ and ‘private’ selves are not delineated in the same way as in women’s testimonies. Men accept the public/private model, while women subvert that division. For women, these domains are interrelated. They are both woven into the text to suggest the political nature of the ‘private’. Women focus on their personal relationships and their domestic and emotional lives. They are less concerned about historical ‘progress’, and more interested in the process of living and experiencing.\footnote{Damousi, p. 200.}

Damousi’s argument is important. But before the significance of gender in \textit{Caviar for Breakfast} can be understood, the nature of the texts produced within the Soviet Union during the thirties must be grasped. The tremendous transformations taking place (the dislocations of the ‘quicksand society’) impacted on every aspect of life, forcing ordinary people to agonise over the meaning of both their public and private selves. Autobiography under Soviet Stalinism was not just a literary form chronicling great events and famous people; it was also an important part of everyday experience. Sheila Fitzpatrick explains that:

Soviet citizens of the 1920s and 1930s were used to telling the story of their lives in public. Numerous interactions with the state required presentation of an autobiographical narrative – for example, seeking employment, applying for admission to higher education, or undergoing the periodic personnel checks of state employees and party members known as purges (\textit{chistki}). The Life, an all-purpose Soviet identity card, was a work of art, polished to a high gloss. Naturally, it represented a selective, partial summary of biographical data, and its public presentation, though habitual, was not an inconsequential action.\footnote{Fitzpatrick, S. \textit{Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia}, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, p. 91.}

Fitzpatrick argues that the process of constructing a Life in Stalinist Russia undercut traditional distinctions between the personal and the political:

\footnote{Fitzpatrick, S. \textit{Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia}, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, p. 91.}

The party had always required its members to be vigilant. But now there was a difference: they should be vigilant not only against the enemies without but also the enemy within. ‘Within’ meant, in the first instance, inside the Communist Party. But
there was also a hint of something even more disturbing, the possibility that the enemy might lie within oneself. ‘Each man … feels that somewhere in the depth of his soul is a little kernel of wrecking,’ writes a student of Stalinist culture.  

The need for self-monitoring was another facet of the peculiar circumstances that produced the utopianism of Stalinist travel narratives. That is, the maintenance of an official discourse of socialist construction, separated from the material forces that might have made the project feasible, placed tremendous pressure on individuals determined (or required) to become good Soviet citizens. Because the conditions under which they were supposed to reshape themselves could not be questioned without challenging the entire basis of the Stalinist state (the principle of ‘socialism in one country’), explanations for the success or failure of a particular person to adapt had to be sourced within that individual. Becoming a Soviet man (or woman) was an ongoing (and ultimately impossible) project that required the constant application of tremendous will and self-control. Igal Halfin notes how Soviet Stalinism created what he calls a ‘hermeneutics of the soul’ which consciously focused on the most personal and intimate realms:

Stalin’s vow in 1937 to destroy ‘anyone who by his actions or thoughts – yes, even thoughts! – encroaches on the unity of the Soviet State’ should alert us to the possibility that movements of the soul mattered to communists a great deal. The broadening by the Stalinist legal system of the notion of counter-revolutionary behaviour through the application of Article 19 of the Criminal Code, ‘via intent,’ allowed Vyshinskii, Stalin’s grand inquisitor, to boast in 1934: ‘We draw no distinction between intention and the crime itself. This is an instance of the superiority of Soviet legislation to bourgeois legislation.’ Without a proper appreciation of the communist notion of subjective guilt it is impossible to understand why confessions played such an important role in Soviet jurisprudence. What, we may ask, prompted Nikolai Krylenko, the commissar of justice, to propose that judges be allowed to skip the judicial inquiry entirely in cases where the accused had confessed? Why did Vyshinskii advise investigations that ‘half a confession in the defendant’s own handwriting’ is preferable ‘to a full confession in the investigator’s

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187 Fitzpatrick *Everyday Stalinism*, p. 194.
writing’? The injunctions to extract confessions do not make much sense unless we take seriously the concern with subjectivity.\textsuperscript{188}

Since no external cause for failure in the communist state could be acknowledged, rationalisations for an inability or unwillingness to become the kind of person Stalinist society required had to be sought deep within the soul of the malefactor. The most appropriate form for individuals to discuss their internal life was, therefore, confession.

The authors of the Stalinist travel narratives depict, from the outside, a state that transformed individuals into new ‘socialist’ men and women. \textit{The Real Russia’s} chronicle of emancipated coke workers and mechanics overcoming rural backwardness has been noted. \textit{Caviar for Breakfast} portrays a similar self-fashioning – but from the \textit{inside}, rather than the \textit{outside}. The book describes an array of confessions, ranging from Baracchi’s self-criticism before the Communist Party of Australia to the 1934 round of Soviet purges – but the single most important transformation is that of Betty Roland herself.

\textit{Caviar for Breakfast} is not, in other words, simply a description of confessions; it is a confession itself.

Like \textit{The Real Russia}, \textit{Caviar for Breakfast} begins with the journey to the new world but, unlike Prichard’s text, it discusses the journey’s point of departure. Where Prichard remains silent about her background and private life, Roland foregrounds her own status as the apolitical wife of a conservative businessman. The trip to the Soviet Union is explicitly identified as a life transforming experience:

\begin{quote}
If I don’t go away with [Baracchi], what then? I continue being Ellis Davies’ wife. Anything, anything is better than that …\textsuperscript{189}
\end{quote}

Thereafter, Roland does her best to reshape herself through political education (‘Guido’s first gift to me was a copy of the \textit{Communist Manifesto}\textsuperscript{190}) and rigorous self-examination, a process that culminates in the adoption of a new name and persona. She leaves for the Soviet Union as Mrs Davies, a businessman’s wife; she

\textsuperscript{189} Roland \textit{Caviar for Breakfast}, Quartet, 1979, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{190} Roland, p. 25.
returns as Betty Roland (having adopted, Soviet style, her father’s Christian name as a surname).

When David Carter suggests that ‘Betty Roland’s book stands apart [from other Stalinist travel narratives], not just because it is a diary rather than a memoir, but in the way her narrator is positioned as a witness, an observer of the Soviet Union rather than a participant in its dreams and nightmares’, he is half right. Caviar for Breakfast is a very different book to The Real Russia, but the difference lies in Roland’s much greater participation in the life of Stalinist Russia. Her involvement in what she describes comes not just from a much longer stay in the Soviet Union (close to two years, as opposed to a few weeks), nor from her enrolment in the Soviet workforce but, most fundamentally, from her attempt to reshape herself in the fashion of those around her.

As Carter notes, the diary form is quite inappropriate for a Stalinist travel narrative. It is, however, perfectly suited to Roland’s purposes.

Jochen Hellbeck identifies the diary as the logical corollary of Stalinist efforts to ‘remove all mediation between the individual citizen and the larger community, so that the consciousness of the individual and the revolutionary goals of the state would merge.’ Diaries are thus vehicles for personal confession in the Soviet state. As Hellbeck puts it:

> a large number of diaries from the 1930s functioned both as records and tools of psycho-physical training. They worked as an introspective, controlling, and regulating device, enabling their authors to monitor the physiological and intellectual processes at work in them, in the service of controlling and perfecting them.

Something of this can be seen in Caviar for Breakfast. Roland’s self-fashioning is never easy, since her background makes her a ‘political pariah’. Her diary chronicles her successes (‘I am beginning to share Guido’s enthusiasm’) and, more particularly, her failures:

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191 Carter ‘History Was on Our Side’, p. 109.
193 Hellbeck, p. 351.
194 Roland Caviar for Breakfast, Quartet, 1979, p. 13.
195 Roland, p. 71.
Twice, when I have been out by myself, I have stolen into Torgsin and with the
guiltiest feeling possible ordered a plate of ham and eggs and some coffee with
delicious cream cakes.\(^{196}\)

Her diary also documents a perilous mission smuggling documents into the
Soviet Union from Britain, undertaken as a way of showing to British communists the
extent of her transformation:

Bourgeois or not that called for a considerable amount of nerve, but I was determined
to do it and perhaps win their respect.\(^{197}\)

To borrow Hellbeck’s appropriation of Stalin’s phrase, *Caviar for Breakfast*
depicts Roland engineering her own soul.\(^{198}\) Fitzpatrick notes how:

at least in some segments of the society [there was] a pervasive uneasiness about
identity that made people suspect their own worth and credentials as Soviet
citizens.\(^{199}\)

This was precisely Roland’s experience since ‘always hanging over me is the
stigma of my bourgeois background.’\(^{200}\)

Paradoxically, it is the (inevitable) failure of Roland’s attempt to transform
herself that allows her to present the text in a very different way when it is published,
fifty years later. That is, in its final form, *Caviar for Breakfast* implicitly reverses the
terms in which Roland’s self-fashioning was originally understood. As Nicole Moore
puts it:

continually defining herself against Baracchi and the party, Roland’s petty bourgeois
dissension is presented almost gleefully, in a candid, tongue-in-cheek self-criticism of
which she presumes the contemporary reader will approve.\(^{201}\)

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196 Roland, p. 76.
197 Roland, p. 139.
198 See Hellbeck, J. ‘Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931-9’ in
199 Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks*, p. 100.
200 Roland *Caviar for Breakfast*, Quartet, 1979, p. 89.
201 Moore, p. 11.
So, for instance, when she and Baracchi visit a member of the old aristocracy, Roland writes:

Guido was uneasy in her presence, feeling that he should despise her but unable to resist her charm. For my part, I thought she was the most courageous and undefeated person I had ever met and admired her tremendously.\(^{202}\)

Roland’s ‘failures’ (in this case, to summon the necessary hatred for an enemy of the regime) become, in the published book, successes. Her inability to accustom herself to the accommodation and the facilities (‘Even at the risk of betraying bourgeois origins, I felt I must rebel’ \(^{203}\)), her horror at the purges (‘A kind of political inquisition’ \(^{204}\)), even her inability to grasp socialist politics (‘Marxist theory remains a mystery’ \(^{205}\)): these all signal to a modern readership her independence and sound common sense.

Confessions are, of course, notoriously contradictory, since an absolution that requires a reiteration of the original transgression, expressed in the most fervent terms possible, necessarily blurs the distinction between justification and contrition. The ambiguity was well understood during the Stalinist era. Consider the famous Bukharin Show Trial where, with the lives of his family at stake, the former Soviet leader confessed to belonging to a terrorist gang – but asserted that his full criminality could only be understood through an in-depth discussion of his political program. In some senses, his responses represented an oblique attempt to critique Stalin,\(^ {206}\) yet Bukharin insisted his statement remained a confession. ‘I do not want to minimise my guilt,’ he explained. ‘I want to aggravate it.’\(^ {207}\)

Roland uses her own confession in a similar fashion. The diary allows her to voice the ideas she held in the 1930s (or, at least, the excitement and enthusiasm those ideas engendered), even as she disavows them. Her private hesitations about the regime make sense only in the context of her public support for it and vice-versa, and so she is able to identify with Stalinist Russia (‘All this is extraordinarily exciting’)

\(^{202}\) Roland *Caviar for Breakfast*, Quartet, 1979, p. 107.

\(^{203}\) Roland, p. 89.

\(^{204}\) Roland, p. 110.


\(^{207}\) Quoted in Halfin, p. 318.
and simultaneously distance herself from it (‘We were all depressed and silent … saddened too by all that we had learnt’) without needing to reconcile the contradiction.\textsuperscript{208} Or, to put it another way, her diary exults in the experience of the Soviet Union even as she condemns it.

This becomes particularly apparent in the context of the extra-textual material appended to Roland’s diary in \textit{Caviar for Breakfast}. In both editions, the original diary is supplemented with various footnotes and interpolations, interpreting its content in light of later events. A note beside a reference to ‘Red Rose Cohen’, for instance, explains that ‘Rose and her husband were also arrested during the Moscow Trials and received savage sentences.’\textsuperscript{209} The shift from the perpetual present of diarist into the historical mode is not, however, accompanied by any reference to Roland’s own membership of the Communist Party of Australia, a question of some significance, given the events she describes. Nor does the text acknowledge her brief involvement with the Trotskyist movement, even though her own initial disillusionment with Stalinism was originally formulated in explicitly Trotskyist terms, with her resignation letter outlining a Trotskyist interpretation of the state of the Soviet Union. That is, when Roland left the Communist Party, she did so by arguing that:

\begin{quote}
while I recognise that the USSR is still a workers’ state and still retains the principle achievement of the October Revolution, ie the socialised means of production, nevertheless the present leadership under Joseph Stalin is the enemy of that workers’ state and, unless speedily deposed, will certainly bring about the destruction of the gains of October and betray the Soviet Union into the hands of the capitalist class, as they have betrayed the revolutionary cause in so many parts of the world since they came to power.\textsuperscript{210}
\end{quote}

Instead, the 1979 Quartet edition of \textit{Caviar for Breakfast} concludes with an excerpt from Freda Utley’s memoir, \textit{Odyssey of a Liberal}, alongside excerpts from letters about the deaths of Freda’s husband and then Freda herself. Rather strangely, though this material situates Utley – whom the reader first encounters as a socialist in

\begin{footnotes}
\item 208 Roland \textit{Caviar for Breakfast}, Quartet, 1979, pp. 71, 96.
\item 209 Roland, p. 130. They were, in fact, executed.
\end{footnotes}
Moscow – as structurally central to the narrative, Roland makes no comment on the nature of the memoir which, as its title suggests, chronicles Utley’s own political evolution from the Left to the Right.

The treatment of Utley in the 1989 version of *Caviar for Breakfast* is even more interesting. The excerpts from *Odyssey of a Liberal* are replaced with an epilogue written by Roland. In it, she explains:

much happened in my life about that time [that is, when she originally received news of Utley’s husband’s arrest] and I heard no more of Freda until, in 1972, I chanced to be in Washington, and there we met again. [S]he was the same old Freda: energetic, bubbling with enthusiasm, warm-hearted and undefeated.\(^{211}\)

Though Roland did visit Utley in 1972, the assertion that she had ‘heard no more’ of her after 1939 is quite misleading. Roland first learned of Utley’s new life in 1970 when she encountered a woman they had both known during their time in the Soviet Union. Rather than concluding she was ‘the same old Freda’, Roland was so shocked by what she heard from this mutual acquaintance that she ended her long and bitter estrangement from Guido Baracchi with a letter explaining how:

[Freda] has become violently reactionary, joined McCarthy in his witch-hunts and is a bosom friend of Nasser! Has his photo, suitably inscribed on her desk, also one from McCarthy with the words: ‘To the best American of them all.’ She lives in Washington and edits one of the extreme right-wing journals, owns two apartment houses and has grown grossly fat.\(^{212}\)

Within *Caviar for Breakfast*, Roland makes no acknowledgement of the distinction between an anti-Stalinism of the Left and an anti-Stalinism of the Right, for to do so would challenge the confessional form around which the book is structured. Leigh Gilmore points out that confessions:

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\(^{211}\) Roland *Caviar for Breakfast*, Quartet, 1979, p. 172.

\(^{212}\) *Papers of Guido Baracchi*, NLA MS 5241 Series 1 Folder 4.
must be regarded … as relational: neither penitent nor confessor is the source of truth-production. Instead, their relationship forms the locus from which confession is generated.213

The confession in Caviar for Breakfast remains a binary opposition (pro-Stalin/anti-Stalin) that the text, despite Roland’s relentless self-examination, never dialectically transcends. The confessional form of Caviar for Breakfast allows the text to simultaneously denounce and defend Stalinism. What it doesn’t allow is the kind of synthesis that would permit a political assessment of what Stalinism means.

In that sense, Caviar for Breakfast foreshadows Roland’s larger autobiographical project, a project in which Caviar for Breakfast itself comes to play a central role. Five years after she published her Russian diaries, Roland published The Eye of the Beholder – part history of Justus Jorgensen’s artistic colony Montsalvat and part autobiography. Montsalvat is, of course, a utopian project in its own right, in which a small group of people try to reshape themselves, by force of will, to fit structures determined by Jorgensen. This was something of which Roland was quite aware:

as the night wore on and [Jorgensen] talked about himself, his aspirations and relations with his pupils, I began to understand why they are prepared to devote their time, their money, and their sweat to the development of this place.

Most of them led pretty aimless lives before they attached themselves to him, now they have a purpose and are rewarded every time they see the lovely buildings they have helped to create. Among the many things he mentioned was the charge that he holds the title to the land and could turn them all out any time he pleases. This amused him very much.214

Implicitly recognising the parallel with the Soviet Union (in, for instance, her comparison of Jorgensen’s bullying with the authoritarianism she experienced in the communist movement), Roland employs a similar confessional structure, shaping parts of the book around the diary she kept during her own visits to Montsalvat.

But the technique developed in *Caviar for Breakfast* proves less capable of dealing with the material in *The Eye of the Beholder*. In part, the problem is simply that the utopian pressures created by an isolated community like Montsalvat (a group of a dozen or so artists) are necessarily much more muted than those generated by the Soviet Union (a nation of millions of people). The nature of Stalinist society forced every citizen to monitor and reshape his or her self wherever they went and Roland’s text could find this pressure as a unifying theme, even as she built the book out of disparate anecdotes and observations. While Montsalvat did put pressure on those who lived within it to reshape themselves (in a fashion, to some extent at least, analogous to the Soviet Union), the pressure was much less intense and much less all-encompassing. For that reason, Roland’s attempt to source the book from original documents relating to Jorgensen seems laboured and disjointed. The diary is, necessarily, supplemented by letters, dialogues and extended descriptions, and thus lacks the textual unity of *Caviar for Breakfast*. David Martin accurately describes it as:

>a good old shopping-bag of a book, out of which spill love affairs, name after name, gossip, some pretty shrewd observations and a few political asides, pen portraits – and what else? Nothing much else.\(^{215}\)

More importantly, Roland’s failure to move beyond her material to an analysis of what she describes is more immediately apparent in *The Eye of the Beholder* than in *Caviar for Breakfast*. Most obviously, it provides no real explanation as to why the reader should care about the sayings and doings of Justus Jorgensen and his small coterie of followers. As Martin argues:

>What she has not managed to do, perhaps because it was impossible, is to explain whether or not something creatively important went on, up there, in the pise and mudbrick *schloss* named after Parsifal’s unapproachable abode. Bohemia is only interesting if the Bohemians are exceptionally talented, otherwise it remains an undistinguished neighbourhood.\(^{216}\)

\(^{215}\) Martin ‘Parsifal in Eltham’, p. 22.
\(^{216}\) ibid.
That failure is related to her employment of a confessional mode in which she cannot transcend the opposition between Jorgensen as, on the one hand, a tyrannical cult leader and, on the other, a benevolent genius. Instead, *The Eye of the Beholder* presents him as both at the same time, much as *Caviar for Breakfast* simultaneously praises and condemns Stalinism. The failure to critically assess Montsalvat is, however, more immediately obvious than the failure to analyse the Soviet Union, simply because the significance of a small artists’ colony needs to be argued, whereas the Soviet Union is, whether one supports or condemns it, indubitably important.

The lack of analysis in *Caviar for Breakfast* has itself major ramifications for Roland’s other biographical work, since the trip to the Soviet Union remains central in her various tellings of her life – and *Caviar for Breakfast* provides the sole account of it. In *The Eye of the Beholder*, Roland’s journey with Baracchi to the USSR is presented as key to her transition from the fringes of Montsalvat to its centre. She writes of the meeting that precipitated her travels with Baracchi:

> I did not know what I was going to do. Then Max Meldrum had his forty-fifth [sic] birthday and Guido Baracchi came along and filled my glass with wine.  

Yet, when it comes to that trip, *The Eye of the Beholder* offers no details of what transpired in the Soviet Union, instead advising the reader to ‘see *Caviar for Breakfast*.’

*Caviar for Breakfast* remains a similarly absent presence in Roland’s two later autobiographical volumes. *An Improbable Life* (1989) tells of her apolitical early life, up to the point where she leaves London for the Soviet Union on the *Felix Dzerzhinsky*. On its final page, the publisher advertises a forthcoming new edition of *Caviar for Breakfast* which, it is explained, ‘follows Roland’s first volume of autobiography.’ *The Devious Being*, published a year later, commences with Roland and Baracchi berthing in Port Melbourne after the conclusion of the Soviet tour.

*Caviar for Breakfast* thus fulfils a strange double role in relation both to Roland’s shorter autobiography in *The Eye of the Beholder*, and her more detailed

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217 Roland *The Eye of the Beholder*, p. 125.
218 Roland, p. 131.
accounts in *An Improbable Life* and *The Devious Being*. Chronologically preceding the other texts, it appears thematically in their midst – an extra-textual complement to *The Eye of the Beholder*, and the absent second part in the later autobiographical trilogy. Moreover, in both instances, it provides the key point of transition. For example, *An Improbable Life* largely covers Roland’s childhood and first conventional marriage, while *The Devious Being* commences with her as a dedicated communist:

We were now committed to the task of winning as many converts to the communist cause as lay within our power – confirmed as we were in the belief that the doctrines of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were the solution to the world’s multiple ills … The hour had indeed come! Or so we believed in 1935, and to die on the barricades seemed an admirable thing to do.\(^{220}\)

The unresolved contradictions in *Caviar for Breakfast’s* attitude to Stalinism leaves the nature of Roland’s conversion to communism entirely unexplained. Its last diary entry reads:

We had a sense of guilt at leaving [their Russian friends] behind and yet rejoiced in the knowledge that whatever fate awaited them we would be spared a similar one.\(^ {221}\)

*The Devious Being*, by contrast, begins with Roland praising the ‘fortunate sequence of events’ that enabled her to extend her Soviet tour for almost two years:

Now we were back where we had started, saddened to think that the great experience was over.\(^ {222}\)

The discrepancy between the two passages (one casting her departure as a sorrowful occasion, the other as a cause for rejoicing) is nowhere explained. Again, the reader encounters her original pro-communist views alongside an ironic and personalised anti-communism.

\(^ {221}\) Roland *Caviar for Breakfast*, Quartet, 1979, p. 185.
\(^ {222}\) Roland *The Devious Being*, p. 1.
Damousi’s argument about the focus on personal relationships and domestic life in the autobiographies of female communists can now be reassessed. *Caviar for Breakfast* is, quite evidently, published in the wake of a seventies feminism that accepts the personal and the domestic as a site of political struggle. Feminism provides the context in which Roland can use the intimate and the everyday as a source to critique the Soviet regime and the Communist Party of Australia.

Roland’s texts are not themselves feminist in any conventional sense, since the personal politics they espouse depend upon the distinction between the private and the public spheres, and not, as Damousi suggests, the subversion of that distinction. Moore notes of *Caviar for Breakfast*:

> Her diary locates Roland … in the space most alien to its discursive frame, which isn’t only the bourgeoisie, but the most profoundly other, the apolitical, ahistorical everyday, which becomes the domain of women. Her dissent is expressed outside the vocabulary of politics and is experienced in the trivial (her gloves, her love for real Italian coffee).

The reliance on the personal as the site for a critique of the party produces, in *The Devious Being* in particular, strange effects. Roland presents her membership of the party, for instance, solely in terms of her relationship to Baracchi, readmitted to the CPA upon his return to Australia:

> It all seems rather childish now, but at the time it was deadly serious and Guido felt like Lazarus restored to health. Woman-like, I accepted everything he said, and received my party ticket at the same time as he was granted his.

She documents Baracchi’s expulsion from the party but makes no mention of her departure at the same time. In so far as she writes of her own disenchantment with communism, she does so simply in terms of her personal estrangement from Baracchi. The effect is a striking diminution of her own (not inconsiderable) efforts as an agitator. Nettie Palmer, meeting Roland for the first time in 1936, identified her as

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223 Moore, p. 12.
224 Roland *The Devious Being*, p. 7.
‘very active [in the communist movement] and serious’. By contrast, in Roland’s account her own activism becomes simply an adjunct to her relationship with Baracchi, much as it would be in a traditionally sexist narrative.

Roland’s indifference to her own political activity in *The Devious Being* is even more remarkable given that, at one time, she clearly felt very strongly about it. Her letter of resignation from the Communist Party, for instance, expressed her disenchantment in explicitly Marxist terms:

> No doubt it will be said that I am ‘deserting the revolution.’ Such is the opposite of the truth. I repudiate the Third International because it is no longer a revolutionary party and can only play a reactionary part in future events. If a miracle took place and the Comintern put forward a genuinely militant, working class, Marxist policy, I would be the first to rejoice and ask to be allowed to help, the same as I will do all in my power to defend the Soviet Union against all enemies, within and without, because, despite all my former associates may say or think, the triumph of the working class and the ultimate achievement of Socialism are the first considerations in my life. Therefore Stalin and his kind are an abomination.

Of course, ideas change, and Roland evidently no longer subscribed to her views of 1940 when she wrote *The Devious Being* in 1990. Yet she cannot acknowledge that she once thought differently, that socialism was, at one time, the ‘first consideration’ in her life, not even to explain why she has changed her mind. The possibility of an anti-Stalinist communism threatens the binary confessional logic (communism/anti-communism) she first develops in *Caviar for Breakfast* and then uses throughout her autobiographical project. For that reason, she excises it from her memoirs.

The decision comes at considerable cost. In 1940 Roland explicitly challenged the political legitimacy of the Communist Party. ‘The Third International … is no longer a revolutionary party,’ she explains in her letter of resignation. In her memoirs, however, she retreats to a personal sphere entirely separate from (and antagonistic to) the political realm – thus implicitly accepting Stalinism’s own claims over the

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political sphere. In life, Roland resigned from the Communist Party precisely because she no longer believed that it represented revolutionary activism. She instead explicitly recognised the possibility of an anti-Stalinist political practice. In her writings about her life, however, Roland treats political activism and Stalinism as analogous or even identical. Her volumes of autobiography criticise Stalinism both in the Soviet Union and in the Communist Party of Australia, but only by emphasising the personal over the political and thus accepting that Stalinism and activism are one and the same – precisely the claim that Stalinism makes about itself. In that sense, Roland’s break from Stalinist literary traditions is not as complete as might be thought.

In some respects, Roland’s autobiographical work manifests the same tensions that have been noted in Katharine Prichard’s texts. Both women accept a division between a public and political sphere associated with Stalinist practice, and a private and personal sphere that is the realm of literature and creativity. Prichard remains enthusiastic about Stalinism but can only write her autobiography by splitting her life into two. Roland, on the other hand, writes about the political through the personal – but, like Prichard, she accept Stalinism’s own claims about its political authority.
Conclusion

Stalinism shaped not only what many Australian radicals in the twentieth century did, but also the way they thought and wrote about their lives and the lives of others. Consider, for instance, Katharine Susannah Prichard’s response to a letter from Guido Baracchi, years after she had broken all personal ties with him because of his Trotskyism:

It was a surprise to hear from you. I feel grateful to you always for having introduced me to Marxism, and an understanding of communist principles. My life has been illuminated by them. Despite shocks and vicissitudes along the way I have been able to hold to the fundamental principles. It seems that you have been more susceptible to changes in the political atmosphere.

Prichard had begun her political life as a champion of radical democracy, free speech and literary experimentation. She died as an apologist for Soviet dictatorship, party censorship and aesthetic conservatism – yet she understood her life as exemplifying a fidelity to fundamental principles. Prichard’s exchange with Baracchi highlights the remarkable extent to which communism managed to define the terms for its own analysis. In his history of the Communist Party of Australia, Stuart Macintyre suggests that Australian communist writers tend to use one of two forms to discuss the past. The first, ‘official’ form – of which Prichard’s Why I Am a Communist is a prime example – ‘evoke[s] the world of the communist in a record of constant engagement, a celebration of commitments, beliefs and hopes set down in a form that leaves little room for doubts or uncertainty, let alone critical reflection on what went wrong.’

Macintyre argues that the decline of communism:

has produced another kind of writing that returns once again to the first person from the third, this time in a more intimate register. These are the memoirs of former

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228 Macintyre, p. 5.
communists looking back on a lost political cause. They write retrospectively in a familiar autobiographical mode that traces the journey from innocence to experience, a transition intensified in their case by the fact that they lost their faith before it was taken from them … They therefore look back across a double rupture to their youthful enthusiasm, and seek both to affirm and to question the cause that illuminated their lives without the self-justificatory insistence of most political biography. For the most part they write in an informal, highly personal style that admits elements excluded from the older communist autobiographies.

Macintyre understands this second type of writing – of which Roland’s work is clearly an instance – as a critical engagement with the orthodox communist tradition. On one level, this is correct. Roland’s memoirs adopt techniques and themes unavailable to Katharine Susannah Prichard, to explicitly discuss, for instance, the Stalinist terror and the discomforts of life in the Soviet Union.

Insofar as the retreat from the political to the personal involves an acceptance of Stalinism as the only viable option for radical praxis, such memoirs represent an anti-Stalinism implicitly constructed on Stalinist terms. In that respect, Macintyre’s two types of life-writing share a common framework, based around official communism’s representation of itself.

The tendency to assess official communism on its own terms is, then, a crucial issue for the study of biography and autobiography within Australian communism. Despite the different forms that their life-writing takes, Roland and Prichard both accept Stalinism’s claim to represent the legacy of the Russian revolution and thus the Marxist tradition as a whole. The political assessments they make of their activism are, on one level, very different, yet Prichard’s Stalinism and Roland’s anti-Stalinism share more assumptions than might be thought.

How, then, might the binary opposition represented by Prichard’s and Roland’s work be transcended? The analysis presented above has emphasised the importance of historicising the communist tradition: in particular, identifying Stalinism as a new and conceptually distinct ideological trend, emerging from the bureaucratisation of the Russian revolution in the late twenties and then spreading throughout the communist movement as a whole.

\[229\] Macintyre, p. 7.
This is, of course, a (broadly) Trotskyist argument. For that reason, it has generally been given little serious attention by biographers and historians writing about the communist movement, many of whom have been either ex-party members (whose anti-Trotskyism has survived their departure from the CPA) or ideological anti-communists (for whom the distinction between official communism and Trotskyism is largely irrelevant).

So, for example, in the most scholarly of the histories of the Communist Party of Australia, Stuart Macintyre argues against the Trotskyist interpretation of Stalinism on the basis that its:

emphasis on a single individual sits ill with the Marxist method of historical materialism. It makes Stalin the scapegoat for consequences that have emerged repeatedly in communist regimes.

The passage reveals a complete misunderstanding of the complex and sophisticated body of theory developed by Trotsky and his co-thinkers, an analytical tradition that, as the most cursory investigation would have revealed, explicitly focuses on the nature of the social system of which Josef Stalin was the leader, rather than Stalin’s function as an individual. For Trotsky, Stalinism represented not the consequences of one man’s malignant will but the isolation of the revolution in backward Russia and the social disintegration of its working-class base during the civil war and afterwards, phenomena that manifested themselves in the growth of a tremendous bureaucracy within the Communist Party, for which Stalin emerged as a spokesman. As Trotsky puts it (and myriad similar passages could be adduced):

It would be naïve to imagine that Stalin, previously unknown to the masses, suddenly issued from the wings fully armed with a complete strategical plan. No indeed. Before he felt out his own course, the bureaucracy felt out Stalin himself. He brought it all the necessary guarantees: the prestige of an Old Bolshevik, a strong character, narrow vision, and close bonds with the political machine as the source of his influence. The success which fell upon him was a surprise at first to Stalin himself. It was the friendly welcome of the new ruling group, trying to free itself from the old

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231 Macintyre, p. 364.
principles and from the control of the masses, and having need of a reliable arbiter in its inner affairs.\textsuperscript{232}

A consideration of the theoretical and historical validity or otherwise of Trotsky’s argument of the evolution of communism in the Soviet Union and throughout the world lies beyond the scope of this thesis. It is, however, appropriate to note some of the broader theoretical issues towards which it points.

Consider, for example, the persistent tension between the personal and the political that manifests itself in various ways throughout the biographical and autobiographical theory and practice of Prichard and Roland. It is, as has been shown, possible to identify specific sources of this tension – in, for example, the generic constraints of the Stalinist travel narrative, the demands of socialist realism, the logic of the confessional form and so on.

But the argument might be taken further. After all, Trotsky identifies one of the characteristic theoretical distortions of Stalinism as the codification of Marxism into a rigid ‘stagist’ theory of social development, a deterministic materialism in which feudalism grows inexorably into first capitalism and then socialism, as the development of the productive forces push history relentlessly forward. Since determinism can never provide an internally consistent social theory (for, taken to its logical conclusion, it implies complete political paralysis), Stalinism supplements its vulgar materialism with an equally vulgar idealism, in which the will of individual leaders (or the Communist Party itself) becomes imbued with an almost mystical significance. The contradiction can be readily observed in Stalinist historical narratives which, typically, oscillate between narratives of progress unfolding seemingly without any human agency and accounts of great leaders entirely unhindered by any material constraints.\textsuperscript{233}

In other words, as a theoretical current, Stalinism struggles to explain the relationship between the individual and history, producing either histories without individuals or individuals without history (or, in practice, a confused mixture of the two). In the generic terms of biography and autobiography, the inability to theorise

the relationship between the individual and history manifests itself as an inability to
negotiate the relationship between the personal and the political. While proximate
causes can be found (as has been shown) for the specific tensions within the
biographical and autobiographical work of Prichard and Roland, the general problem
they face cannot be separated from the theoretical failings which Trotsky identifies
with the Stalinist tradition as a whole.

It is important to treat communist biography and autobiography seriously as
literary forms rather than merely as sources for history. At the same time, it is also
necessary to insist that a close reading of the theory and practice of Australian
communist biography and autobiography requires a renewed engagement with
communist history.

The creative project *Communism: A Love Story* is intended as a contribution to
that task.
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Abbreviations

ACA  Anti-Conscription Army
ALP  Australian Labor Party
ASIO Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
ASP  Australian Socialist Party
CC   Central Committee
CPA  Communist Party of Australia
CPGB Communist Party of Great Britain
FIA  Federated Ironworkers Association
FOSU Friends of the Soviet Union
IIW  International Industrial Workers
ILP  Industrial Labor Party
IWW  Industrial Workers of the World
KPD  *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (Communist Party of Germany)
LPG  Labor Propaganda Group
LRD  Labour Research Department
LSE  London School of Economics
LSG  Labor Socialist Group
OBU  One Big Union
OGPU *Ob’edinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie* (Joint State Political Directorate)
VSP  Victorian Socialist Party
WAC  Workers Art Club
WEA  Workers Educational Association
On 13 December 1975, Australia’s sixties—that brief but inspired frenzy of political and cultural dissent—came to an end.

On that day, Malcolm Fraser won the election that retrospectively legitimised his dismissal of Gough Whitlam’s reforming Labor government. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* observed, ‘the tremendous vote against Labor right across the country [represents] … a rejection of its philosophy and an endorsement of our traditional free enterprise system’.

Something else happened. Forty-eight hours earlier, a man called Guido Carlo Luigi Baracchi had celebrated his birthday. He’d turned eighty-eight and, to mark the occasion, drank a bottle of champagne with his daily help, Mrs Janzen. Then, with the thermometer climbing to 39 degrees, he went electioneering, campaigning against Malcolm Fraser through the pubs of Penrith. By the afternoon, he felt distinctly unwell. He returned to his house in Emu Plains, went into the bedroom to lie down and collapsed unconscious on the floor. He remained for two days in intensive care; he died on 13 December, as the newspapers reported a landslide victory for the Liberals.

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This is a book about the man whose life ended on the day that so many hopes were dashed. It’s a book about communism in Australia: what it was, what it became, and what it meant to those who lived it.

After 1975, the Communist Party never exerted any real influence on mainstream politics in Australia. As the sixties ebbed away, and the pools of protest dried up and turned stagnant, party membership steeply declined, until the organisation officially dissolved itself shortly after the Berlin Wall came down.

Yet, although communism has been dead in this country for a long time, its ghost—or spectre, if you like—still stalks the battlements of our culture and, these days, its wails and howls torment the Left more than the Right. Today, the victors of the Cold War define the legacy of Australian radicalism. Marxism, they tell us, should be understood with Nazism; as Martin Amis puts it, Stalin’s big moustache sits alongside Hitler’s little one. The gulag, the famines, the show trials: that, and nothing else, was what communism meant.
If they were simply arguing about history, the Cold Warriors could be safely left to quarrel with the antiquarians and the academics. But this is not a debate about the past. It’s an argument about the world in which we live.

‘Something had clicked in my brain which shook me like a mental explosion.’ So Arthur Koestler described his first encounter with communist theory. ‘The new light seem[ed] to pour from all directions across the skull,’ he wrote. ‘The whole universe [fell] into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke.’

That transformative explosion was, over seventy years or so, shared by tens of thousands of Australians. In that time, the Communist Party combined its subtle but powerful theoretical armoury with an international infrastructure that lent the struggles of the disenfranchised a gravitas, an undeniable dignity. A picket line might consist of a banner, a fire smoking in a forty-gallon drum and a few stalwarts on folding chairs—but the strikers, if they were communists, still felt the warming presence of Paul Robeson and the Finland Station, Sputnik, the International Brigades and the Paris Commune.

Communism provided an alternative. It was, in many ways, the alternative, the most important indicator that society could be remade. Between 1917 and 1989, its star shone bright and its star shone dim, but its continuing sparkle in the political firmament allowed millions to believe in a world beyond the free market. Even those who despised communism felt that while it existed, change—whether they wanted it or not—was a possibility.

Today, that feeling has gone.

A slogan carried by anti-globalisation protesters in London a few years ago displayed the loss. It ran: ‘Tear down capitalism and replace it with … something nicer!’ The whimsy expresses a real dilemma. With communism gone, few of us can articulate a different kind of society, another economic model or even a philosophical challenge to the buy-low, sell-high ethics of the market. If there is no longer an alternative, what sense does it make to protest, whether in the street or at the ballot box? The absence of choice results in cultural erosion, as large swathes of the population withdraw from the public sphere into a sullen and silent cynicism.

It’s not just dreadlocked anti-WTO demonstrators who are affected by the absence of political alternatives. Traditionally, the Labor Party has, as John Button puts it, ideologically ‘loitered like a foolhardy pedestrian in the middle of the road between the excesses of capitalism and the inefficiencies and totalitarianism of Soviet communism’. Yet Button’s description itself reflects the era of communist collapse: once you’ve identified the Soviet system as inefficient and totalitarian, it scarcely provides much in the way of attraction. Not surprisingly, after Whitlam, the ALP abandoned the bitumen altogether, so that it now sits happily on the kerb alongside the Liberal Party: two quarrelsome but sociable neighbours,
waiting contentedly for the same bus. Such has been the rightward drift since 1975 that Malcolm Fraser, once the wooden-faced totem of born-to-rule conservatism, seems today a voice of sanity and moderation—even as he insists his own views remain largely unchanged.

All this is simply by way of saying that communism—both as a dream and as a reality—continues to matter, if only because its absence helps explain the state we’re in now. And there’s more to say on the subject than embittered ex-radicals and high-salaried conservatives will ever acknowledge.

A different generation of anti-communists at least recognised the complexities. In 1950, the British Labour MP Richard Crossman edited *The God that Failed*, one of the most important ideological interventions of the first Cold War. In it, the black novelist Richard Wright discussed his disillusion with the Communist Party of the United States. He talked of its intolerance, its cynicism, its lack of democracy and everything else that ensured he couldn’t continue as a member. Then he concluded with a remarkable passage mourning what the party had meant to him. ‘I knew in my heart that I should never be able to write that way again,’ he said, ‘should never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, should never again express such a passionate hope, should never again make so total a commitment of faith.’

There’s a strange and sad tenderness in his words, the kind of sorrow that might overwhelm a man reflecting back on a love affair gone sour. ‘I’ll be for them,’ he wrote, ‘even though they are not for me.’

Unless we can understand why, even as Wright lent his pen to a polemic against his old party, he felt his heart breaking, then we will never fully comprehend what communism meant.

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‘In expansive moments (*in vino veritas*), I occasionally brag of having been at kindergarten with [Governor-General] Casey, at school with [Prime Minister] Bruce and at university with [Prime Minister] Menzies, adding that, between them, they made a Bolshevik of me.’

That was Guido Baracchi’s explanation, very late in life, of his personal ideological evolution. His father Pietro, a Florentine gentleman, professional astronomer and ‘weather prophet’, became a household name in Melbourne during the late nineteenth-century craze for meteorology. The young Baracchi played in his father’s observatory, studied at Melbourne Church of England Grammar School, read law at the University of Melbourne … and then went to gaol for inciting unrest in the civil population.

Why choose Guido to illuminate the meaning of communism, rather than any number of other, better known individuals? In part, the answer lies in the diversity of a career that threw
him into contact with so many different facets of the communist experience. Guido was, in the words of historian Stuart Macintyre, ‘the knight errant of Australian radicalism … a man of considerable wealth and emotional spontaneity, utterly without guile or worldly ambition, of luminous innocence and limitless self-centredness’. As one of the nation’s first student activists, he locked horns with Robert Menzies in the deadly serious game that is university politics. He joined with the larrikins of the Industrial Workers of the World after Prime Minister Hughes declared membership a crime punishable by hard labour. He sat in a smoky room in Liverpool Street, Sydney, as a handful of young rebels founded the Communist Party of Australia, an organisation from which he was expelled twice. He watched the first stirrings of Nazism in the Berlin of Cabaret and Bertolt Brecht; he travelled through the Ukraine as Stalin’s famine decimated the population.

Despite all this, he remained as unlike the stereotypical communist as one could imagine: an avowed revolutionary with expensive tastes and inherited money, a gentle Marxist as au fait with poetry as proletarian dictatorship, and an activist who interspersed his political obligations with a series of complicated romances. ASIO classified Guido as ‘a person of bad moral character and violent and unstable political views’; some of his more dour comrades secretly concurred.

He was never an average party member, but in certain respects Guido was typical. ‘What I remember most about the communists,’ writes Vivian Gornick in her oral history The Romance of American Communism, is their passion. It was passion that converted them, passion that held them, passion that lifted them up and then twisted them down. Each and every one of them experienced a kind of inner radiance: some intensity of illumination that tore at their soul. To know that radiance, to be lit from within, and then to lose it; to be thrown back, away from its light and heat; to know thereafter the ordinary greyness of life, black and lightless; that was to know a kind of exaltation and dread that can be understood only, perhaps, by those who have loved deeply and suffered the crippling loss of that love.

That was the essence of Guido’s experience; that is the story this book tells. Guido came to the labour movement through an affair with the doomed poet Lesbia Harford (nee Keogh). His clandestine relationship with Katharine Susannah Prichard, later the novelist eminence of the Communist Party, introduced her to the Marxism that shaped her later books. He married Toby, his first wife, knowing her only a few days. He fell in love with Neura—the beautiful, volatile companion of his European adventures—after a chance meeting in the street, and broke off with her just as abruptly many years later. He lived with the playwright Betty
Roland in the Soviet Union, and stayed with her among the bohemian artists of Montsalvat and at Walter Burley Griffin’s Castlecrag colony.

As the lawyer scrutinising Guido’s last will put it, with judicial understatement: ‘The Deceased had led a colourful life, having had at least two de facto relationships with women as well as being legally married four times. It appears that he had four children, one of which was legitimate and three of which were illegitimate …’

Yet, as with those Gornick interviewed, communism always remained Guido’s great love: a vision of a different world that burned itself into his soul and stayed with him all his life. It was communism to which he gave his heart—and communism that wounded him the most. He loved it long and dear, yet it brought him neither contentment nor peace. As an affair, Guido’s infatuation with communism was more Gothic romance than Mills and Boon, a tale of seduction, deception and, eventually, betrayal.

‘With the exception of the church and its myths and legends,’ wrote Richard Wright, ‘there was no agency in the world so capable of making people feel the earth and the people upon it as the Communist Party.’

So it was in Australia. This is the story of Guido Baracchi, the Communist Party to which he belonged, and the earth that it made people feel.
When, on 10 February 1918, Guido Baracchi walked down to the stump of the Anti-Conscription Army on Melbourne’s Yarra Bank, he knew that the police were waiting. Meetings on the Bank—a traditional forum for radicals, religious dissenters, sex reformers and other turbulent spirits, on a parcel of land adjoining Batman Avenue—had not been suppressed but no one, after four years of war, believed that speech remained in any sense free.

The old world—with its liberal culture of reason and progress and ‘play up, play up and play the game’—was quite dead, cut down by the machine guns rattling in France. A nation that had rallied, once, behind cries of freedom and the overthrow of the despotism in Berlin, now banned Harper’s Bazaar, Cosmopolitan, Good Housekeeping and other publications of the International Magazine Company of New York, apparently because, for an overworked censor, the mere suggestion of internationalism smacked of sedition and disloyalty. Police confiscated Hansard to suppress criticisms of the war; the authorities worked over the pacifist papers until their columns emerged anodyne to the point of meaninglessness.

Most of all, the repression targeted the Industrial Workers of the World, since its militants (known as ‘Wobblies’) had denounced the slaughter in Europe from the outset. ‘This organisation,’ Prime Minister Hughes warned, ‘holds a dagger at the heart of society … As it seeks to destroy us, we must in self defence destroy it.’ Twelve Wobbly leaders faced long sentences in gaol; membership of the IWW had itself become a crime.

That was why the police now watched the Anti-Conscription Army so carefully. They suspected—and not without reason—that its members, most of whom were ex-IWW men, had simply taken a new name to reforge an old organisation. They were particularly wary of Guido, the ACA’s secretary, and they kept a careful eye on him as he made his way through the Yarra Bank crowd.

The plainclothesmen saw a slight, fair-headed man of about thirty, smiling easily as he greeted acquaintances and friends. Guido was no worker; you could tell that from his carefully tailored clothes and well-brushed shoes, even before you heard the education in his voice. Yet he walked without hesitation to join the hefty unionists from the docks and the
slaughteryards as they rallied the crowd with the IWW song, ‘Bump Me into Parliament’, a savage parody of Labor opportunism.

‘I know my Bible off by heart,’ they sang, ‘And Jesus justifies me/The man who will not vote for me/By Christ he crucifies me.’

A lone woman, small and dark with unnaturally pale features and a too-bright glitter in her eyes, stood in the midst of these burly men. She was Lesbia Keogh: a law graduate and a poet, now working in Melbourne’s clothing factories. Guido hailed her with a comradely greeting; she responded in kind but her face hinted at the unfinished business that lay between them.

Anyway, there was no time for that, for the songs were ending and the speeches were beginning.

Guido, as secretary, took to the rough wooden stump, a pamphlet in his hand. It was entitled the Anti’s Creed: a scurrilous production presenting a purported catechism of the ‘No’ advocates, in which anti-conscriptionists pledged support for the massacre of nuns, the killing of babies and the burning of haystacks.

Though the pamphlet had been widely distributed during the referendum, Guido had only just seen it. A more cautious speaker might simply have exposed the forgery, disowned the pamphlet and moved on to another topic. But Guido was not in the mood for caution. People were dying like beasts in Europe’s mud, yet all the great and good of Australia—the clergy, the politicians, the editorialists—called for the bloodshed to continue, just as they had for the past three years. The moral catastrophe of the Great War represented, for Guido, more than a policy failure or a false step in international relations. Britain and Germany stood at the apex of European civilisation: industrialised and modern, enlightened by science, steeped in culture and the arts. Yet their assembly lines turned out bullets and grenades rather than clothing or houses, their technicians perfected poison gas canisters instead of medicines, and their poets—the heirs of Goethe and the sons of Shakespeare—urged more young men on to kill and be killed.

Something was terribly wrong: not with this minister or that government but with a system that could move from trade disputes to military conflict without breaking step. The lying pamphlet provided an opportunity to distinguish the Anti-Conscription Army from those timid souls who didn’t like compulsory military service but equivocated about what the fight against it really entailed and, so, at the top of his lungs, Guido began to condemn the ‘rubbishy sentimental way’ other anti-conscriptionists had distanced themselves from the pamphlet.

‘I like this Anti’s Creed,’ he said, his naturally gentle voice straining to be heard. ‘It is a bitter pamphlet and a fierce pamphlet and I like it.’
The phoney catechism explained that ‘No’ supporters opposed conscription because they believed that the men at the front should be sacrificed.

‘This is what I say in retort to that,’ Guido shouted. ‘I do not care who wins the war, I do not want either side to win the war, I want the peoples of both sides to overthrow the governments of both sides.’

He continued through the catechism, taking each of its outrageous propositions in turn and ostentatiously endorsing them. The Anti’s Creed alleged that ‘No’ supporters wanted to save their own skins. Guido declared that it made perfect sense to avoid ‘going into that unholy holocaust of slaughter for ends that have nothing to do with the working class’. The pamphlet claimed its opponents did not care who won the war and were indifferent to Germany’s sinking of the Lusitania. Guido acknowledged his hostility to the war effort and told his listeners that, given that the Lusitania carried weapons, its sinking no more constituted a crime than the destruction of the merchant ships that Britain targeted.

It was a provocative speech: indeed, under the circumstances, it was downright reckless. ‘Either Mr Baracchi has taken leave of his senses,’ wrote the Crown Solicitor Gordon Castles, when he scrutinised the shorthand transcript, ‘or … he is too dangerous a man to be allowed at large, and whatever the result of any prosecution is I think Mr Baracchi ought to be interned during the continuance of the present war.’

Of course, in 1918, madness and sanity were relative terms. As Guido later said, he wanted to break ‘irrevocably with capitalist society and its bloodbath’—and that was what he did.

He was in the midst of explaining why he thought that Nurse Cavell, shot by the Germans as a spy, had received no more than her just deserts (‘Under the guise of nursing the sick she was spying and spying and spying …’) when two plain clothes officers decided that he’d said more than enough. Grabbing Guido by the arms, they dragged him from the stand and then hustled him out through the hooting crowd. As they shuffled him off to the magistrate, Lesbia caught hold of Guido’s sleeve.

‘It was the hottest speech I ever heard!’ she said.

To understand the meaning of Guido’s arrest—and the significance of his conviction—it’s necessary to temporarily leave 1918 with its rough crowd on the Yarra Bank and move back into the world in which he grew up. In 1887, the year of Guido’s birth, Melbourne basked in a quite different era. Back then, the land boom seemed destined to roll on forever. It was a time
of fortunes acquired at breakneck speed and dissipated at the same velocity, an era of baroque fashions, lavish dinners and mansions of stupendous vulgarity.

Guido’s mother, Kate, had inherited her wealth from her father, George Petty, an immigrant from Ireland in the early, rude days of the colony. When gold set Melbourne booming, he went into business providing fresh and plentiful meat from wholesale butchers’ shops in Bourke Street and Elizabeth Street. At an earlier time or in a more sophisticated place, the bloody apron of the slaughterhouse might have debarred a man from polite society but, in rough-and-tumble Melbourne, the origins of most wealthy dynasties did not bear scrutiny and, once Petty joined the general enthusiasm for land speculation, his became an established name in the city. As his position consolidated, he overcame the stigma of a lowly birth to found an estate he called Cleveland House and embrace the traditional gentlemanly pursuits of racehorse breeding and alcoholism, with such enthusiasm that he died in 1877 from an illness the papers coyly called ‘dropsy’ and the medical examiner labelled cirrhosis of the liver.

Pietro Baracchi, Guido’s father, came from a Tuscan family of independent means. He received a gentleman’s education that taught him to write three languages and speak two more. He studied astronomy and civil engineering at university, and he served briefly in the Italian army, which was still infected by Garibaldian liberalism, before deciding that Italy offered few prospects for ambitious, talented professionals. In 1876, with his colleagues and friends Carlo Catani and Ettore Checchi, he enrolled in an immigration scheme that advertised free transport to New Zealand.

Making his way to Melbourne in search of a job, Pietro worked for several years as a surveyor before Robert Ellery, the government astronomer, offered him a permanent post at the Melbourne Observatory. Thereafter, he took his place in the strange astronomical community in the Botanic Gardens, where the Observatory’s domed buildings, sculpted according to the elegant principles of the astronomer-architect Jacques Dominique Cassini, rose in the midst of a miniature scientific village. At the time, all the sciences basked in considerable public esteem—and none more so than astronomy. A series of brilliant cosmic events had illuminated the late nineteenth century—two transits of Venus, two transits of Mercury and the great comets of 1880, 1881, 1882 and 1887—and these spectacular displays, plus the sudden affordability of telescopes, fostered a nationwide enthusiasm for skygazing.

It was Pietro’s particular good luck that his invitation to join the astronomical brotherhood gave him access to the most prestigious post of all: responsibility for the observatory’s Great Melbourne Telescope, a behemoth of the skies that had been installed in 1868 with tremendous fanfare. The sheer enormity of the thing still stirred considerable national pride—and now, each evening when the white dome on the viewing house rolled
away, Pietro Baracchi lay beneath Melbourne’s own celestial cannon, staring down its barrel at the mysteries of creation.

He was eleven years older than Kate when they married at St Mary’s, an old bluestone Gothic church in St Kilda. The photos from the wedding day captured the tall and auburn Kate, looking sternly beautiful, with the impossibly narrow waist demanded by contemporary fashion. In his private diaries, Baracchi referred to Kate simply as his ‘bambina’—his baby—and he remained devoted to her throughout his life.

For all that his parents shared in the fortunes of the age, Guido’s exposure to the wealth around him was, in various ways, tempered: partly by Pietro’s good taste, which eschewed the crassness of Melbourne’s nouveau riche, but also by the spartan lifestyle of astronomy, with its late nights and early mornings discouraging dissolution and excess. The observatory staff lived on site in small but pleasant cottages situated near today’s Shrine of Remembrance. Secluded from St Kilda Road by their own grove of trees, they grew vegetables and fruit, kept chickens and raised their families. The households centred on the almost rustic routines of the observatory, calibrated with the cycles of the moon and the rhythms of the stars.

The trainees included, for a year or two, a young Lionel Lindsay, hesitating between a passion for science and a talent for art. On one occasion, he brought into the observatory his sketchbook full of studies of Titian’s nudes. Baracchi picked them up by mistake.

‘Who did these?’ he asked.

Lindsay confessed his responsibility, expecting the usual condemnation of his prurience. Instead, Pietro, in ‘his quick pleasant Italian way’, gave the sketches a careful scrutiny and advised Lindsay to abandon astronomy for painting.

‘This is your business,’ he said.

That was Pietro: sufficiently liberal to not censure the boy for drawing smut, and aesthetically sophisticated enough to recognise his talent. Guido was nourished by his father’s culture, surrounded by a huge collection of scientific books, and literature written in five languages. The family life was always comfortable—the Baracchis maintained a nurse for Guido alongside Lizzie the parlour maid and Ann the cook—but the business of the household revolved, not around the Petty estate (though it silently provided most of the wealth), but the acquisition of knowledge via Pietro’s telescope.

With Guido in kindergarten, a downturn in trade blossomed into a full-blown Depression, until nearly 30 per cent of the workforce lacked employment. The number of desperate people sleeping rough in the gardens steadily increased, and throughout the straitened districts of Melbourne, children Guido’s age sold flowers and newspapers, picked pockets or scavenged for glass and paper. In ‘Child Newsvendors’, Mary Gilmore imagined such waifs dreaming of the comforts enjoyed by wealthy infants:
We know that always, somewhere, earth
Is warm and grass is green: that skies
Are blue, that hours go by where none
Turn slowly dayward, languid eyes
That wish themselves deceived and ask
To find the dawn no nearer than
The night! We know that in the long
Cold hours before the daylight can

Creep out across the world, within
Their mothers’ arms lie children such
As we, so warm, ah God! So warm …

The urchins may well have been imagining Guido, whose days began with a walk, white-gloved hand held by his nurse, to a small private school in Caroline Street. The unpleasantness of the downturn (‘We shrink,’ cry the newsboys, ‘before the hardship of our lives …’) vanished at the door of the classroom, where the Templeton sisters tutored the children from the best families in South Yarra. Richard Casey—the future Governor-General—attended alongside the daughter of a newspaper proprietor, a few daughters of successful lawyers, and the infant Mabel Emmerton, later Dame Mabel Brookes. On the Yarra Bank, agitators called for social revolution and the ragged crowd nodded approval; in the Templeton kindergarten, the boys and girls learned—alongside reading, writing and arithmetic—dancing, elocution, deportment and the other skills necessary for their eventual accession to polite society.

Though the Depression brought funding cuts to the observatory, Pietro’s personal stocks continued to climb. By 1895, he had become acting government astronomer—the head of the Melbourne Observatory in fact, if not in name, with a staff of three astronomical assistants, one meteorological assistant, one clerical assistant and two messengers on site, as well as some five hundred volunteers stationed around the country.

The young Guido watched his father emerge as a significant public figure: the colony’s ‘weather prophet’, responsible for forecasts throughout Victoria. His pronouncements were discussed and debated, not simply by farmers, sailors and those with a professional interest in the climate, but the average newspaper reader anxious as to the prospects of enjoying a Sunday picnic free from southerly busters or summer showers. As soon as he was old enough to read, Guido followed Pietro’s appearances in the press: the regular forecasts, the obligatory interview on the eve of the Melbourne Cup and the occasional special feature revealing the mysterious goings-on within the observatory dome.
Throughout his childhood and into early adult life, Guido remained the focus of his family’s considerable resources, though he seems to have been much closer to his father than his mother. His papers contain a sad locket labelled ‘Mother’s hair’ but nowhere in his letters or autobiographical jottings does Guido provide more than a passing mention of Kate. Family photos never show the two together; there are images of Kate and images of Guido, but never pictures of mother and son in the same frame—an absence made more striking by the regularity with which Guido and Pietro pose side by side.

In October 1895, Guido contracted scarlet fever, and it was his father who devoted himself to personally nursing the boy through the often fatal infection, recording Guido’s diet, activity and symptoms with the same exactitude with which he charted the stars. Two anxious weeks passed before Pietro could tell his diary: ‘Here ends this calamity. It gave bambina, Guido and me a very bad turn. I am glad it is now all over.’

Illnesses aside, the family’s good fortune seemed to increase every year. In 1897—when Guido was ten—Pietro received a knighthood from the Italian monarch, King Humbert I, a decoration that bestowed upon him the imposing title ‘Commendatore’. By 1905, he and his family had joined Kate’s sister Ettie and her husband Tom Quirk, whose son Nibby became Guido’s inseparable playmate, as residents of the recently extended George Hotel in St Kilda—an ostentatious warren crammed with gilt and polished furniture, serviced by French chefs and the latest hydraulic lifts.

Neither the George’s dazzling splendour nor the favours of the monarchy entirely effaced the liberalism Pietro had imbibed as a youth. He still spent his leisure hours with the Wallaby Club, a gentlemen’s walking society that, though exclusive, possessed a progressive tinge: the members who assembled for its dinners, comic concerts and occasional strolls included Alfred Deakin, the future Prime Minister, HB Higgins, the liberal lawyer and politician, and HH Champion, a Fabian reformer with a distinctly radical past. Pietro even went so far as to provide a free lecture to the Victorian Socialist Party on the work of the Observatory, until word of Melbourne’s most famous scientist consorting with sedititionists reached local politicians (including, eventually, the Victorian cabinet), who cautioned him not to repeat the performance.

Pietro’s liberalism, however, never challenged his faith in the fundamental soundness of an Australian society that had so richly rewarded a young immigrant. In 1901, when Guido reached an age for secondary schooling, Pietro enrolled his boy in the elite institution par excellence: the Melbourne Church of England Grammar School. Grammar balanced upon the twin pillars of wealth and social class, and deliberately sought to make young gentlemen conscious of their place in the world. Its masters, with their gowns, black hats and ferocious moustaches, taught a history of English kings, a literature extending from Shakespeare to Tennyson, and a theology in which God demonstrated His omnipotence by the regularity and
severity with which He smote Britain’s foes. It was a curriculum for the next generation of Melbourne’s elite.

Coming from a multilingual family and possessing a talent for languages, Guido took to the classical syllabus at once. Pietro’s diary of his son’s first year recorded with succinct pride: ‘[Guido] got on very well at school and got a prize.’

The next year, however, his progress halted. Pietro chronicled numerous minor illnesses, and Guido performed badly in class, to the extent where his father called in a mathematics tutor. He had entered puberty (‘He is no longer a child,’ Pietro wrote), a process that quite naturally distracted from polynomials and quadratics. But could there have been more to it?

In 1902, Guido watched while the Governor-General unveiled a tablet honouring the seventy Old Grammarians who had fought in the Boer War—and the twelve who lost their lives on the veldt. In chapel, the Reverend AW Tonge commanded the boys in Oxonian tones to give thanks for the deeds of the troops, the life of the Queen and the resurrection of the Christ. The Melbourne Grammar library stocked up on Fitchett’s *Deeds that Won the Empire*, a collection of stirring battle stories written, its author explained, as ‘an effort to renew in popular memory the great traditions of the Imperial race to which we belong’.

The Boer War nurtured a new and explicitly militaristic nationalism and, already sensitised by the traumas of adolescence, Guido suddenly confronted the possibility that the imperial race might exclude the Catholic child of an Italian father, no matter how famous, and an Irish mother, no matter how rich. In public schools, manly sports came to count more than effete scholasticism as a demonstration of the spirit of Empire, and during Guido’s final year, the annual football game between Melbourne Grammar and Wesley College culminated in a very public brawl at the St Kilda cricket ground where ‘some boys shouting with delight, rushed round from group to group, hitting every hostile face they saw’. In the ensuing days, newspaper correspondents praised the fight as an inspiring exhibition of youthful vim. ‘It is a recognised practice of Eton and Harrow, and other large English public schools, to fight on the occasion of their meeting at an interschool match, and no fuss is made over it,’ explained a writer. ‘I think that these matches are the training ground for the development of courage and fair play by which the British school boy is known the world over.’

At home, Guido flatly resisted his father’s attempts to teach him Italian. He didn’t want to be a ‘dirty dago’, he said, repeating the schoolyard taunts, and the lessons culminated with an enraged Pietro chasing his boy with a tennis racket.

Yet, even with his Italian name, and no especial aptitude either for sport or for combat, Guido managed to assimilate. His illnesses gradually abated and his form master described him as ‘a boy of distinct ability … doing remarkably good work all round’, while even in mathematics (his weakest area), the teacher allowed that his work was ‘fairly sound’.
For the rest of his life, Guido remained utterly at ease amongst the wealthy and the privileged, and harboured a definite affection for public school. On many occasions, he reminisced about how he’d seen Stanley Melbourne Bruce, several years ahead of him at Grammar, as a ‘schoolboy hero’.

How did an Edwardian hero conduct himself? In 1901, Bruce was head boy, led the football, cricket, rowing and athletic teams, and commanded the cadets. In Guido’s first months at Grammar, Bruce solemnly approached Headmaster Blanch for permission to address the boys after assembly, without the masters present. Blanch asked whether Bruce wanted to tell him anything; Bruce replied that he would rather not. The head duly led his staff out of the hall and Bruce stood up and explained to Guido and the other boys the crime that some amongst them had committed.

During a recent cricket match, two boys called upon to bat could not be found. Worse still, they were eventually located in a nearby field, cavorting with some local girls. Bruce called the offenders forward, administered a brisk caning and told the students that, for the good of the school, no more would be said of the matter.

The necessity for discipline, whether in matters sporting or sexual; the determination to protect public honour; the po-faced gravity—all of this perfectly exemplified the public school ethos of the era. Here was the mould that shaped the young men for the carnage of 1914, a generation for whom interrogating the rationale for war made as little sense as questioning the basis for a Wesley and Grammar football game.

Guido, of course, travelled down a different path, but more than a particle of Melbourne Grammar lodged very deep within him, and it didn’t leave, even after he’d been to places no public school boy should go. In 1967, after the publication of Cecil Edwards’ biography Bruce of Melbourne, Guido composed a comic poem about the years he’d spent battling Bruce, which Edwards forwarded to the former Prime Minister. ‘Thank you for the sonnet which came with your letter,’ Lord Bruce replied. ‘Reading it, I cannot but feel some satisfaction in the kindly way you apparently regard me.’

With Baracchi in his eightieth year, the public school code—in which the intensity of conflict only increases the regard for a valiant adversary—still made itself known. Certainly, when Guido left Grammar in 1905, there was no reason to imagine, thirteen years later, he’d be a dangerous agitator, much less a convicted criminal heading for gaol.
On 26 February 1918, some two weeks after his Yarra Bank oration, Guido shuffled into the Melbourne gaol in Russell Street. Tried and convicted, on the basis of his Anti’s Creed remarks, of sowing disaffection amongst the civil population and prejudicing recruiting, he was ready to face prison. In front of him stood a certain Frank Duffy, thirty-five, with forty-three prior convictions for drunkenness. After Duffy, the warders processed John Bourke, an illiterate labourer and habitual burglar, staring at eighteen months gaol for larceny.

Such was the criminal class: neither the monsters portrayed by the respectable press, nor the innocents that radicals sometimes imagined, but rather a collection of broken down and hopeless men, brutal and brutalised, whose prison records spoke of minimal education and manual work, interspersed with bouts of unemployment, criminality and alcoholism. In 1918, the bulk of prisoners were charged with depressingly similar offences, with drunkenness the most common conviction, followed by larceny, offensive conduct and absence of visible means of support. In an era when only a few ‘scientific’ reformers interested themselves in rehabilitation, prison did its utmost to make the degraded know the depth of their degradation. Vance Marshall, a Sydney unionist doing time for a political offence in 1918, described a New South Wales gaol as ‘coated with the phlegmy saliva of liquor parched throats … The whole atmosphere was nauseating and revolting’.

The men inside fully understood the educative function of gaol. They knew why warders refused to allow them to wash, why the lavatory consisted of a basin in the open air, and their food contained gristle and vegetable scraps. As one derelict told Marshall, ‘Yes. Me fust time. Seventy-five years old an’ still learnin’. Learnin’ I ain’t no better than a dorg.’

The sudden arrival of a young gentleman whom no one—least of all himself—could mistake for a ‘dorg’ caused understandable consternation. The registrar recorded Guido’s personal details: eyes, blue; complexion, fair; hair, fair. Guido affirmed that he could read and write, explained that he belonged to no religious denomination and gave his occupation as ‘law student’. The first answer was uncommon; the second, rare; the third, entirely unprecedented.

Though the university in Carlton was only walking distance away from the Melbourne gaol, it might have been located in another land altogether, with its ducks paddling on the
varsity lake and the Gothic spires of the old Wilson Hall peeping out from behind lush trees. The professors lived on its Arcadian grounds with their families. The students numbered only about seven hundred. The tiny minority of women sat in the front of the lecture theatres; they entered to the sounds of the men stamping their feet in unison. Some lecturers insisted their pupils wore academic gowns. The students possessed no newspaper, theatre clubs nor political organisation. They were overwhelmingly wealthy. They were uniformly conservative. They did not, normally, graduate to prison.

The university career of Prisoner Baracchi had begun, twelve years earlier, in 1906, when he enrolled as a boarder in Trinity College: a place linked by theology and shared history to the Church of England Grammar School. The Trinity culture was exemplified by its warden, Dr Alexander Leeper, a tightly wound, emaciated figure known inevitably as ‘Bones’ who had led the campaign against the university music department’s Professor Marshall-Hall when he published some erotic poetry and supposedly slurred Christianity. The warden’s success in driving Marshall-Hall from the varsity inspired Pietro’s old pupil Lionel Lindsay to pen the poem ‘Mrs Grundy’s Guardian Angel’, with its memorable chorus:

I’m a Trinity Professor
Of a nasty turn of mind,
Sort of classical confessor
Who has got an axe to grind.

Though Leeper did his best to enforce a puritan discipline (fining his charges for lateness and upbraiding them for their manners at dinner), Guido, in his first years, immersed himself in the ephemeral but intense pleasures of the university he and his contemporaries called the Shop. He accompanied the parties heading off to the opera; he ate flounder at Grundens in Bourke Street; he sat at one of the university tables at the Savoy in Little Collins Street, where students, exploiting the tolerance extended to gentlemanly hooliganism, hurled their bread rolls at the dress shirts of other diners. They staggered out on pub crawls and then, too befuddled to walk home, flopped themselves down on a north-bound tram, confident that the conductors would stop at Lygon Street and obligingly set the drunken young masters lurching off in the direction of the colleges.

He was, in other words, a typical member of the college fraternity, noted by his contemporaries for his ‘charming and fluent conversation’ and the care and expense he lavished upon his wardrobe. He had briefly carried a torch for his classmate from the Templeton school, the wealthy and beautiful Mabel Emmerton, but when she went to England for her presentation to court, he abandoned himself to the romantic possibilities of the Shop, where a young buck from a good family stood a fair chance of charming a chorus girl into a supper party after the theatre.
Scholastically, the unhappy conclusion of 1906, when he comprehensively flunked the few exams he deigned to sit, surprised no one. The young Baracchi was, after all, the kind of scholar other boarders dubbed a:

‘never do work’ young man

A ‘stage devotee’ young man,

With ties coloured tropical,

Bit of a topical,

‘Do the Block often’ young man.

After a second year in which his social success waltzed arm in arm with his academic failure, Guido returned to live at the George Hotel, a retreat probably reflecting his lack of scholarly progress (Trinity baulked at students who failed two years in succession) but also, perhaps, a reaction to the decline of his mother. Kate Baracchi suffered from chronic nephritis, a slow onset kidney disease bringing weight loss, an absence of appetite and a generalised weakness. Today she would have received dialysis; at the time, the medical authorities prescribed warm clothing and milk and broth. She died on 22 August 1908, when Guido was twenty. No record survives of how Kate’s death affected her son, though his switch from science to medicine might have been a response to the inability of doctors to prevent his mother wasting away.

Pietro clearly felt Kate’s loss keenly, choosing, over the next few years, to bury himself in work. Distracted by problems astronomical, and often on expeditions abroad, the elder Baracchi made little attempt to direct his wayward son. He knew that the Petty estate—valued at Kate’s death at more than thirty-two thousand pounds—could absorb any amount of university fees, and he left the boy to make what he would of education.

Politics scarcely arose at Trinity, in part because many of the students were too young to vote, but more because the ubiquity of conventional conservatism at the Shop left little to discuss. A suggestion by several college men that the common room add the Bulletin to its library spurred Dr Leeper to declare the publication ‘a disgrace and a danger to Australia’ for its ‘coarse and insulting references to the Crown’—and the chastened boarders meekly convened a special meeting at which they voted to have no further contact with the pernicious doctrines of Bulletinism.

Guido, entirely apolitical, raised his hand against disloyalty like all the rest. But the bitterly fought federal election of 1910 caused him to reconsider. The Labor Party had once previously formed a minority government; now its supporters saw a chance to establish the first ever purely Labor ministry, a prospect that, for conservatives, seemed to signal the end of the natural order. The Argus accordingly explained the poll as ‘a straight out fight to ascertain
how Victoria stands in regard to progressive liberal government on the one side and socialistic revolutionary government on the other’.

Guido, with nothing better to occupy him, joined the crowd outside the newspaper office, watching the initial results pasted up on the hoardings. With the emphatic win of Andrew Fisher’s Labor Party becoming clear, he overheard the reaction from a nearby couple.

‘Labor’s won,’ said the woman. ‘What happened?’

‘Capital will leave the country,’ her partner responded.

‘Oh!’ she said, in a tone of horror.

The exchange, trivial in itself, forced Guido to consider for the first time the curious fact that not all passengers on the ship of state shared his casual optimism about the vessel’s progress. Of course, he’d always known, in a careless way, of the existence of what reformers called ‘the social question’ but it had stirred no particular passion in him, and the emotion that the election results engendered in others left him vaguely uneasy, as if, by inadvertence, he’d missed something of importance.

He took to alternating his days at the races and his evenings at the theatre with long hours haunting Cole’s famous book arcade in Bourke Street, where he consulted, at first with idle curiosity, but then with more and more interest, the splendid collection of ‘advanced’ literature—a legacy of the same humanist rationalism that inspired proprietor EW Cole to install the monkey cages that reminded customers of their Darwinian origins. Cole encouraged visitors to his eccentric emporium to browse at their leisure, so Guido’s initial and tentative investigations of the mysterious entities known as Capital and Labour proceeded with Cole’s string orchestra twanging away in the background and the dainty odours of the arcade’s perfumery assailing his nostrils.

This atmosphere of cheerful unconventionality provided the perfect environment for an absorption of HG Wells, the writer who most occupied Guido’s mind over the next years. He pored over Wells’ *In the Days of the Comet*, a tale in which a mysterious change in atmospherical composition ushers in a more rational society where war and poverty vanish, and the narrator’s unhappy love triangle resolves itself as men and women take, without jealousy or possessiveness, as many partners as they like. It was a typical Wellsian denouement and one that, on the book’s first publication, provoked the *Times Literary Supplement*’s reviewer to sniff: ‘Socialistic men’s wives, we gather are, no less than their goods, to be held in common. Free love, according to Mr Wells, is to be of the essence of the new social contract.’

For precisely the reasons he appalled the moralists, Wells enthralled the younger members of the pre-war generation. ‘There you were,’ George Orwell later wrote, ‘in a world of pedants, clergymen and golfers, with your future employers exhorting you to “get on or get
out’, your parents systematically warping your sexual life, and your dull-witted schoolmasters
sniggering over their Latin tags; and here was this wonderful man who could tell you about
the inhabitants of the planets and the bottom of the sea, and who knew that the future was not
going to be what respectable people imagined.’

Guido would have entirely agreed, both about Wells’s wondrousness, and the pedantry
and dullness of clergymen and educators. In class, he watched his anatomy professor Dicky
Berry display two skeletons in the lecture theatre. The innate difference in the bones, the
professor explained, rendered a society of equals entirely impossible—but for Guido, fortified
by his reading, the lectures merely provided a startling confirmation of Wells’ epigram that
socialism entailed a battle against stupidity.

Wells appealed to the values Guido had absorbed in the observatory, even as he taught
him to link sexual freedom with social emancipation. ‘Sex!’ declared the hero of The New
Machiavelli, one of Guido’s favourite books, ‘is a fundamental thing in life … I’m going to
look at it, experience it, think about it—and get it square with the rest of life.’ Socialism
would destroy the patriarchal family. It would raise women from their subordination, abolish
war and poverty, liberate the workers and turn sexual love into a free communion of equals—
and if the exact process by which these transformations would occur remained rather cloudy
for Guido (as indeed for Wells), that did not, at first, really matter.

Guido was now in his twenties, older than many of the other students and a natural leader
for the boarders who shared his lofty disdain for the examination room and the textbook.
When his childhood companion Nibby Quirk joined him at Trinity, Guido inducted his cousin
into the business of student life: with Rupert ‘Sos’ Wertheim, the beanpole son of a German
piano manufacturer (and the great-uncle of future Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett), they sat
drinking in the Savoy as a scion of the Fawkner family pulled out a gun and—to howls of
merriment from the other diners—blazed away at the hotel’s grandfather clock.

Guido had found in Wells and, to a lesser extent, George Bernard Shaw, ideas that
challenged the restrictions he’d previously accepted. At the Social Club (the students’
governing body), he applied his resolve to a complaint that—if not, perhaps, as
earthshattering as the conundrums confronting the characters in In the Days of the Comet—
was immediately relevant. Breakfast at Trinity ended too early, a matter of everyday vexation
to those disposed to gentlemen’s hours. What’s more, the milk was adulterated and the
firewood insufficient. These were iniquities, Guido told his fellows, that the college must
remedy.

A certain Herbert Campbell, later the archdeacon of St Arnaud, Victoria, and already
solemnly conscious of his responsibilities, rose in defence of the natural order. The real
problem, he contended, lay not in the shortage of wood nor in the quality of milk but rather in
the lack of respect for constituted authority, a tendency he personally attributed to ‘the loose
way in which senior men spoke of the authorities and of other seniors, setting a very bad
example which was quickly imitated by younger men’.

Thus, over a jug of watery milk, the gulf between progress and reaction stood revealed.

Guido’s evolution over the next years from a hazy liberalism to something altogether
more radical might be explained, in part, by this atmosphere in which the mildest suggestion
of reform was treated as if it were overt insurrection. In 1913, with the ALP due to face the
electors, the business world once more strained to prevent a repetition of the unhappy
experience of Labor in power. As the newspapers filled with proof of the socialists’ unfitness
to govern, Guido invited the MP Dr William Maloney to debate Labor’s platform at a meeting
of the Dialectic Society.

The society was the college debating club and, as the newly appointed secretary, Guido
had been using it to experiment with his ideas. He expressed, for instance, his hostility to
prohibition during a discussion of licensing laws by producing, at the end of his speech, ‘a
champagne bottle from the folds of his gown and brandishing it in the air, with an exhortation
to his followers to rally round the standard, [and] sat down amid tempestuous applause’.

Champagne was one thing; the Labor Party was quite another. What’s more, Maloney—
known as the ‘Little Doctor’—stood on the Left-most fringes of Labor, a party he’d joined
after previous allegiances to both the Knights of Labour and the Social Democratic
Federation, two radical organisations regarded by the respectable classes as little better than
criminal gangs. The prospect of such an exotic appearing within Trinity’s stately walls
generated prodigious interest, with Ormond and Queen’s Colleges proposing to send
representatives—until Dr Leeper, who customarily chaired Dialectic meetings, flatly refused
to tolerate Maloney in the college grounds.

The warden’s opposition threw the Dialecticians into a gloom that lifted only when Guido
realised he could use his own money to acquire the nearby Parkville Hall as a venue. Once
more he extended an invitation to Maloney and the Little Doctor, relishing the chance to
aggravate Leeper, declared his pleasure in attending.

The novelty of Labor speaking in (or at least, near) the university, coupled with the
frisson of authority defied, ensured a large attendance of collegians—and Dr Maloney proved
everything they expected. Barely more than five feet, Maloney displayed his bulldog frame in
a silk suit, Panama hat and striking scarlet tie. Like most Labor politicians of his day, he’d
learnt to speak not in the lecture hall but on the soapbox, a much more exacting school of
rhetoric, and, despite the hostility of the audience, he effortlessly dispatched the Right-wing
students who argued that the Labor Party should be rejected ‘because it stood for union
tyranny’. As one of Guido’s friends put it, he ‘possessed more oratory in his little finger than
the whole pack of us put together’.
Maloney’s manifest competence was a revelation for Guido, who had arrived sporting his own red tie ‘daringly, if somewhat strangely, set off by a capitalistic emblem in the shape of a fifty-pound pearl pin’. But the intriguing suggestion that a university man might learn from a workers’ leader, rather than the other way round, remained unexplored during the tumult of the rest of that year.

For Guido was also co-editing the Trinity magazine *Fleur-de-Lys*, sharing the responsibility with the prim and pious Campbell. With his socialistic cravat now on permanent display, he used his inaugural edition to rail (under the *nom de guerre* ‘Libertas’) against Leeper’s insistence that boarders attend chapel or pay a fine.

‘I plead for freedom,’ he cried. ‘Freedom to go to chapel when we want to go … In spite of all you do, we reverence what, where and when we choose.’

*Fleur-de-Lys* circulated widely amongst Trinity old boys, who accordingly learnt—alongside the football scores and rowing results—of the disturbingly irreligious tendencies reigning in their old college. Herbert Campbell resigned in pursed-lip fury, while the Social Club, over Guido’s protestations, asserted the right to scrutinise future issues before publication.

Still, Guido, as editor, possessed an undeniable way with words and the Social Club, despite its reservations, declared the edition a ‘distinct success’. The Dialectic Society met afterwards to choose its Prelector—the student who delivered its annual public address, an event of considerable importance in respectable Melbourne’s social calendar—and Guido beat Campbell in the poll for the honour.

With its editor emboldened, the second *Fleur-de-Lys* that year took up the call for a student representative to sit upon the college council. ‘Surely,’ Guido argued, ‘we are entitled to some say in the ultimate management of our own affairs.’

Perhaps unwisely, he chose to supplement his democratic demands with a Wellsian dissertation on sexual freedom. Entitled ‘Picking Up—The Finest Game on Earth’, this second essay enlightened *Fleur-de-Lys*’ readers on how ‘the continual advance of socialism and a less artificial view of what constitutes good manners’ had fostered a ‘delightful alternative’ to formal introductions between the sexes. ‘A man sees a girl whose looks he likes,’ Guido explained, ‘stares at her a moment friendly wise, and if her eyes reciprocate, conversation is forthwith begun. The reverse process may also occur, a glance of invitation coming from the girl.’

Dr Leeper, still seething about the Maloney debacle, found this frank discussion of the techniques of libertinage entirely obscene, and promptly conveyed as much to the Social Club. A duly chastened student body formally resolved—despite a vocal pro-Baracchi
minority—that ‘the October issue of the Fleur-de-Lys does not reflect the tone of the College’.

Guido’s Trinity career hung in the balance. He had been selected to deliver the Prelection at an event attended by the governor and extensively reported by the press. Now the college had publicly repudiated him. The proper thing was to resign—both as Prelector, and perhaps even from Trinity itself.

Before he could take any such drastic move, salvation arrived from an unexpected quarter. After showing no more passion for medicine than for science, Guido had transferred to law, a discipline perhaps more in keeping with his awakening political consciousness. His lecturer, Professor William Harrison Moore, took a fatherly interest in his students and, when news of Guido’s difficulties reached him, he proposed that young Baracchi take a break. How would Guido feel about a short course at the London School of Economics, an institute established and run by Fabian socialists?

Moore knew the LSE’s director Pember Reeves personally. He would write to him on Guido’s behalf. He was sure that Reeves could find room for a bright young Australian. The Prelection could be postponed, and he could deliver it when he came back.

Guido leapt at the chance. He had the money. He had the time. His friend Sos Wertheim was about to embark on a Grand Tour of Europe. They could travel together, returning only when Trinity tempers had cooled.

Moore doubtless hoped that an overseas stay would calm Guido’s passions, that study at the LSE would ease an obviously talented but wayward young man away from radicalism and into a conventional career. It had precisely the opposite effect.

On the Omrah, the 8000-ton luxury liner that carried him to the continent, Guido immersed himself in Wells’ political manifesto First and Last Things, absorbing himself so much in the book that he copied out slabs of the text, with the names of his own friends replacing Wells’ associates. In Europe, he and Sos pointedly travelled through the hills of Switzerland, on the same journey that had led to the sexual awakening of the protagonist in The New Machiavelli, another book in which Guido delighted.

In Paris, Guido joined the fashionable throng at Henri Bergson’s lectures at the Collège de France, listening as the philosopher, whose writings on evolution and the creative impulse would soon feature on the church’s Index of Prohibited Books, took the crowd on an expedition into the far reaches of intellectual speculation. Elsewhere in the original city of revolution, Guido heard, in an assembly of workingmen, the famous socialist Jean Jaurès, an orator who was to Maloney what Maloney had been to the Trinity boys. For the first time he encountered the labour movement as a living, breathing phenomenon, and he could not help
but wonder if the literary socialists were correct in so confidently identifying social reform with the middle class.

England posed the question even more sharply. The London School of Economics boasted an eclectic and sparkling mix of staff and students. It hummed with new, exciting ideas, and Guido’s vaguely Fabian socialism, rather than causing scandal, scarcely rated mention. Though ostensibly non-partisan, the school hosted an array of clubs and societies, most with a progressive, even radical, tinge. Sidney Webb, the Fabian Society’s driving force, regularly lectured, alongside George Bernard Shaw and others Guido had previously known only through books.

The students were different, too. In contrast to the Anglo-Australian uniformity of Trinity, the LSE pupils comprised a swirl of nationalities and cultures, with one of the highest proportions of women enrolled anywhere in England and at least two hundred foreign students. Between lectures, undergraduates and academics dined together in the refectory, and these informal discussions, with academics and pupils tossing around the events of the day, taught as much as the classes.

Yet, at close quarters, English literary socialism seemed rather less impressive than when admired from afar. In their speculative moments, Wells and Shaw utilised a handily passing comet or some newly evolved supermen for the transformation from which their new societies emerged. In real life, the available options were more prosaic, and so socialism rested, for Shaw and for the Fabians, upon an enormously expanded bureaucracy which would, they claimed, benevolently meet the needs of the impoverished and the benighted. They did not expect untutored slum-dwellers to contribute to socialism’s construction; indeed, any notion that the poor should do more than passively await their middle-class saviours was misguided since, as Beatrice Webb magisterially put it, ‘reforming society is no light matter and must be undertaken by experts specially trained for the purpose’. The strike waves that broke over England in the immediate pre-war years caused the Fabians no little annoyance. They might sympathise (or, in the case of the Webbs, they might not) with half-starved wretches shaking their fists at their employers, but they saw nothing positive in industrial turmoil which could only disrupt the state power on which they relied.

Guido knew little enough about unionism in theory (and nothing at all in practice), but he intuited that the strikes represented something important. For an explanation, he turned to the *New Age*—‘the most excellent weekly review in the English language’, he later said. AR Orage, its editor, possessed a rare ability to attract people of brilliance and coax from them their most sparkling writing; regular contributors at that time included Hilaire Belloc, GK Chesterton, Arnold Bennett, Ezra Pound, Katherine Mansfield and Wyndham Lewis. The *New Age* promoted Nietzsche. It discussed Picasso. It debated Bergson. It introduced the
English to psychoanalysis and it allowed Havelock Ellis to talk of homosexuality. Most importantly, it promulgated a distinctive socialist doctrine, developed in opposition to the grey Fabian bureaucratism. In the midst of a strike wave, the *New Age* hailed the trade unions, not as a menace or a nuisance, but as the framework of a new society. Unionism, according to Orage and his co-thinkers, represented (at least potentially) the modern incarnation of the mediaeval guilds through which the artisans of old had collectively regulated their craft. This was guild socialism: a system in which national guilds themselves would set wages, maintain work standards and provide pensions, all without market intervention and with only a very limited role for the state.

Guild socialism provided a more coherent and rigorous schema than Guido had previously encountered, a model that recognised the creativity in the ordinary men and women whom Wells and the Fabians dismissed so peremptorily. For Orage, the modern world enslaved humanity, not simply through poverty and deprivation, but by the transformation of imaginative human labour into mindless drudgery. In a different society, everyday toil would not wreck the body and stunt the intellect but would blossom into a creative, joyous endeavour—witness the difference between the factory’s empty routine and the mediaeval workshop where craftsmen employed techniques honed through generations to make simple, exquisite handicrafts. Capitalism meant cheap ticky-tack; the guild state would allow every labourer to combine the useful and the beautiful at his workbench.

For Guido, the *New Age* provided an affirmation that social justice could co-exist with culture; that the two were, in fact, intimately connected. By the middle of 1914, he’d become a confirmed guildsman.

The diminution of his confidence in Wells’ socialism did not, however, lessen his interest in the politics of gender. Just before he left England, Guido attended a suffragette rally on Hampstead Heath. The campaign for women’s right to vote had become exceptionally bitter, with activists resorting to window smashing and other forms of direct action. Only a year earlier, Emily Davison had died when she jumped in front of the King’s horse at the Epsom Derby. Many other women continued hunger strikes in gaol.

Guido watched the rally pass and heard the bystanders jeer the speakers. Entirely in sympathy with the suffragettes, Guido stood up to voice his solidarity—and succeeded in attracting the rowdies’ attention. In London, the Baracchi name provided no protection and, alongside two of the suffragettes, Guido was roughly manhandled into the pond. ‘The mob was very ugly,’ he wrote later, ‘and I got the fright of my life.’

This small taste of violence was all the more unsettling for its contrast with what, to Guido, seemed the sheer reasonableness of the suffragettes’ case. It was disturbing, this atavistic opposition to change, for it hinted at a deeper irrationality lurking somewhere
underneath the twentieth century’s gleaming façade, and one for which the guild socialists, with their enthusiasms for the organic culture of the past, made little provision.

But he did not pursue the thought, for it was time to come home. As he made preparations to return to Australia during the balmy summer of 1914, he could scarcely imagine the ferocity that the modern age was about to reveal.
At about 2.30 p.m. on 26 February 1918, a van took Prisoner Baracchi from the Melbourne gaol in Russell Street to Coburg’s Pentridge Prison to serve his three-month sentence. The Inspector-General had given the staff special instructions about this new inmate, including specific directions to exempt him from the humiliation of the gaol camera and the fingerprint pad.

Pietro—despite his retirement, still a force with which to be reckoned—pressed the prison governor for a personal interview. Though he found the staff ‘very tough and unsympathetic’, his intercession brought further indulgences. While ordinary prisoners wore shapeless, scratchy uniforms, Guido retained his own clothes. Other inmates pleaded for tiny indulgences like toothbrushes, shaving soap and garden seeds; the authorities allowed Guido his own bedding, tobacco, candle, weekly visitors and regular correspondence. They put him to work in the library, a treasured berth amongst prisoners, where he busied himself dispensing battered editions of Rob Roy, Treasure Island and Oliver Twist. In the evening, he read by candlelight in his stone cell, navigating through the complexities of the second volume of Capital.

Pietro came again on 5 March, sitting with Guido for half an hour in the library and promising to bring tea, coffee, condensed milk and clean singlets and hand-kerchiefs. Pietro noted, in the diary he seemed to take up each time the boy got into trouble, ‘He looks very well and seems in fairly good spirits. But I think that when we left him he must have felt as if the Devil had again put the lid on his grave.’

The sensation was perfectly understandable. Pentridge remained Pentridge, no matter how softened by fresh handkerchiefs: a prison that housed genuinely dangerous men alongside its derelicts and petty thieves. Then, as now, violence served as the lingua franca of the penal universe. The warders buttressed their authority through casual bashings, and the men settled their differences by the same method. During Guido’s internment, at least one minor riot seems to have taken place, since the records of the gaol staff include, amidst a chronicle of employee drunkenness and routine incompetence, a rare commendation from the Inspector-General for 10 March 1918, when two of his men quelled a ‘disturbance’ in the reformatory.
Though he seemed soft, the vicissitudes he faced never dented Guido’s self-image. Later in life, unkind enemies suggested his courage stemmed from an aristocratic disbelief that the lower orders might actually harm him, but his deep self-confidence added to his charm (‘his inherent happy personality’, as the Socialist put it), which smoothed his way in almost any situation. Even in Pentridge, he made friends. The IWW leader Percy Laidler reported after he visited that Guido had become ‘a great favourite among the workers [the prisoners]’ and seemed ‘well satisfied with the treatment he’d received’. Pietro, too, described his son as ‘always well’ and ‘jolly’—the last adjective, in particular, not one customarily applied to residents of the Coburg correctional facility.

The wide public support he received surely helped.

‘There has been too much expediency, too much glossing over things, and altogether too little plain speaking,’ one well-wisher wrote. ‘When I think of the numbers who ought to have been where you are, had they spoken the words they felt to be true, I am ashamed and offer them my condolence and lamentation. You I congratulate.’

Others took their protest directly to the Attorney-General. John Evans explained that: ‘By unanimous direction of the last meeting of the Surrey Hills Branch of the Peace Society I have to earnestly request the release from Prison of Mr Guido Barrachi [sic].’

The sentence Guido faced scarcely compared with that of the IWW’s leaders—some of whom, convicted of arson, were not due for release until 1931!—but his case, in some ways, outraged liberal sentiment more, since it involved no suggestion of criminality and clearly demonstrated the judicial bias against anti-conscriptionists. Guido had been punished for speaking his mind in response to the Anti’s Creed; the author of the pamphlet had escaped all punishment. His was a free speech case that moderates, as well as radicals, could support.

Besides, even before his imprisonment, Guido was well known: partly because of the famous Baracchi name, but also because, only a few months earlier, he had so spectacularly incurred the wrath of the university and the newspapers.

The trouble really began with the circumstances in which he departed England and the LSE in 1914. He had planned to make a leisurely return through Europe but his carefree amble through Germany, Austria and Hungary coincided with the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. The European war broke out as his ship was travelling back to Australia.

His isolation, first in Europe and then on the ocean, meant that the ideas Guido had imbibed in London remained largely uncontaminated by the toxic nationalism produced by war. In the England he’d left behind, former radicals of all persuasions added their fevered blessing to the conflict: HG Wells himself wrote jingo columns for the London newspapers, while the New Age denounced the Teuton as an ‘untamed, snapping, barking, brute’. In
Melbourne, a kind of madness stalked the city, as oompah bands, dachshunds and sauerkraut disappeared, and patriots found spies fishing for the telegraph cable at Westernport, Prussian inventors manufacturing flying machines in Clifton Hill and Lutherans hailing the Kaiser from the pulpit. Wharfies in Port Melbourne physically attacked their Russian co-workers, despite Great Britain counting the Czar amongst its allies; rumour identified Sos Wertheim’s brothers as German agents, operating a radio transmitter at their piano manufacturing plant.

Guido, by contrast, arrived in Australia, according to *Fleur-de-Lys*, ‘fairly bursting with stories of adventure’ and ‘with an absolutely new and final solution of the social problems of the world’. He remained sufficiently confident to devote his Prelection to an exposition of his political discoveries and so, when the Dialectic Society assembled in the chapterhouse at St Paul’s Cathedral, with the Governor Sir Arthur Stanley and a host of luminaries in attendance, Guido took to the stage in full academic gown to embark upon what the *Age* described as ‘the somewhat delicate task of preaching a new doctrine of Socialism’.

Despite the many employers in the hall who were naturally less than enthusiastic about an over-educated young man urging their staff to declare ‘that they would no longer work for wages’, Guido managed to convey some of his own passion for his subject, so that even Dr Leeper had to acknowledge in his diary that the speech had been ‘very good’ and Sir Arthur magnanimously declared that he could not ‘condemn a man for looking into the future’.

Yet the political winds over the next months blew so chill as to penetrate even Guido’s cloak of self-assurance, for he played almost no part in university politics throughout 1915. That year, recruiting posters mysteriously appeared on the walls of the common room, returned soldiers buttonholed eligibles in the city streets, and the newspapers reminded their readers:

Your king is Calling, your Country’s Calling,
Your women are Calling, too—
We Want a Hundred Thousand Men
And the First We Want, is YOU!

The images flashed up in the cinema, the signs outside the recruiting stations, the constant talk of shirkers and ‘cold feet’—few ex-public schoolboys, drilled since infancy to serve the King, could resist. Dr Leeper called a special meeting when the news of war broke, to outline the empire’s cause and demand Trinity residents support Britain’s struggle. All but eight of the fifty men in residence signed up on the spot.

The news, when it reached Guido, of the conversion of his ideological mentors from the brotherhood of man to the crusade against the Kaiser might have left him temporarily theoretically disarmed, but he still felt no personal enthusiasm for the war and certainly no
inclination to fight in it, even as both Nibby Quirk and Sos Wertheim found their way into khaki.

Instead, he eased himself back into university politics in 1916, after a new round of industrial disputes fostered a certain political liberalisation. The men of Trinity and the staff of the university had already demonstratively signed the ‘Kitchener’s Pledge’, promising to shun liquor until Berlin fell, and the young Robert Gordon Menzies, very much the dominant figure in student affairs, used the pages of *Melbourne University Magazine* (*MUM*) to rebuke those ‘University men [who] have so little sense of the fitness of things that they see nothing extraordinary in the spectacle of educated men … openly and unashamedly playing the drunken sot!’ So when the Law Students Society debated the merits of six o’clock liquor licensing, and Guido spoke for the pro-alcohol ‘Crème-de-Menthes’, his invitation to listeners to ‘forsake the teapot and get back to French claret and good beer’ contained a muted but unmistakable challenge.

Speaking for the ‘Rechabites’ in that debate was the eighteen-year-old Esmonde Higgins, known universally as Hig. The nephew of Pietro’s friend HB Higgins, Hig already belonged to the Victorian Socialist Party, the Melbourne radical group whose supporters ranged from the reddest of revolutionaries to the palest of parlour pinks. His rebelliousness co-existed with a Baptist conviction of his own unworthiness, manifesting itself in confessions of real and imagined sins. In recurrent spasms of self-chastisement, he drew up wildly ambitious schedules for his intellectual development: in first term one year, he pledged himself to work sixty hours, write two political articles and read one novel, one collection of poetry and one ‘serious intellectual book’ each and every week.

A few months later he scrawled: ‘That plan, needless to say, didn’t come off.’

Even if his education did not proceed at the cracking pace he wanted, Hig still read widely and deeply, and in the areas that preoccupied Guido. Reinforced, perhaps, by the presence of a co-thinker, Guido spoke, for the first time, at the Melbourne University Historical Society, the debating club that had become the students’ main political forum. Before an audience of sixty or so, he argued his guild socialism: until the wage-earner exercised control over the factory, he explained, workers would differ from slaves only by their ability to choose the master to whom they sold themselves.

Even the more liberal students thought the abolition of the wage system went rather too far, and Robert Menzies, the Historical Society’s vice president, opposed it with real vehemence. The young Menzies already spoke with an unction that had earned him the nickname ‘the Honourable Robert’, and, against Guido’s extremism, he solemnly declared his support for the ‘*via media*’—Latin for ‘middle way’. The present system constituted a happy
compromise between capital and labour, he explained, and the nostrums of wild-eyed reformers like Mr Baracchi would serve only to tilt society from its natural balance.

Hig kept his elder sister Nettie Palmer regularly updated on activity at the Shop, sending her letters and samples of the varsity magazine. Like her husband Vance, Nettie had established herself as an author; together, the Palmers advised, mentored and promoted local writers, in a mission that kept them central to Australian letters for a generation. ‘Menzies’ maudlings must be suppressed!’ she wrote in horror after reading the future Prime Minister’s clunky patriotic verses in MUM. But she felt almost as uneasy about Hig’s admiring descriptions of his new chum Baracchi. Had her little brother befriended some campus Champagne Charlie?

Strong and determined, Nettie possessed both the dazzling Higgins intellect and the moralism that accompanied it. She and Vance adopted the bluff manner of the bushmen Vance idealised; even in their private correspondence, they addressed each other as ‘mate’. They might have expected to despise a man so utterly lacking in asceticism, yet when Guido came up to Emerald, where the Palmers lived with their baby Aileen, they succumbed at once to the Baracchi charm.

‘I do like Guido,’ Nettie told Hig. ‘He’s a thousand times more real than you had led me to imagine. If you see him, tell him Vance is very grateful for the book and that I’ll be writing soon to make a date with him: and that I’ll make an Ideal Tart for the date.’

The book that so delighted Vance was probably Ramiro de Maeztu’s Authority, Liberty and Function in Light of the War, the newest and most sophisticated exposition of guild socialism. The Palmers had come under the influence of Orage and the New Age when they’d lived in London, a few years before Guido. Their socialism, however, possessed a distinctly nationalist slant and, when hostilities began, Vance and Nettie had supported France against Germany. ‘I feel that fighting it through is the only way to finish it,’ Nettie explained to her brother.

Hig responded with disgust: ‘You brought me up a socialist, thank you … but I am not going to be an anti-socialist even though you are … You showed me how hideous all Jingoism is, and countenancing this rotten war really must be rank and mangy Jingoism.’

When they returned to Australia, Vance and Nettie changed their mind about the righteousness of France’s cause—but so did the precocious Hig. In a state of abject confusion (‘I have changed my opinions every time I tried to think, and so my opinions now are considerably different from those of January’), he presented himself to the military board in 1916—only to discover that his parents had withheld their consent, and the medical officer regarded his eighteen-year-old frame as too puny for active service.
Guido slid more smoothly than his friends through these choppy ideological waters. With more interest in economics than Vance, he emphasised guild socialism’s critique of the wage system, an institution that the rulers of both Germany and Australia sought to preserve, and so his ideas soon evolved from a vague suspicion of the war to something more like overt opposition—especially since, like Hig, he’d begun attending the VSP’s anti-war meetings.

In seven weeks from mid-July 1916, the Australian Imperial Force sustained 27 000 casualties in the mechanised butchery of the Somme. Yet the politicians remained committed to a fight to the finish. ‘War prevents Australians from becoming flabby,’ Prime Minister Hughes exulted. ‘War has purged us from moral and physical decay!’ He returned from England in the middle of the year determined to make military service compulsory.

The debate over conscription led, eventually, to a split in the Labor Party but, even as Hughes lost the support of the Left, he gained the fervent backing of the Right. After he announced a referendum, all the Melbourne papers campaigned openly for conscription; when Punch asked ‘Who will say no?’, the magazine gave the answer that appeared in less poetic form throughout the press:

The parasite, a Trades Hall knave
To cowardice, an abject slave
Exemption he will meanly crave.
He will say ‘no’.

The university naturally provided a solid bastion for the ‘Yes’ case, with most of the staff enrolling in the Universal Service League. Menzies, president of the Students’ Representative Council, might have chosen to soldier in the University Regiment rather than the trenches of France, but as editor of MUM he devoted the journal to campaigning for a ‘Yes’ vote.

Though he passionately supported the ‘No’ case, Guido remained on the fringes of the first anti-conscription campaign. Hughes demanded that eligible men register for service, a call that most activists refused to heed, dismissing it as a transparent preparation for conscription. Guido, though, dutifully presented himself for inspection. He nursed an injured knee when he faced the physician and, when ordered to run up and down the hall, managed only a halting performance. The doctor, discovering a chest rash, scrawled something in the register, and Guido managed to make out the words: ‘Heart disease and syphilis—doubtful’.

Even at the end of his life, the diagnosis still amused him. ‘I do not know whether it was my military eligibility that was thus doubtful,’ he wrote, ‘or whether it was the diseases themselves. At any rate, now rising eighty-three, I must confess I still feel myself none the worse for either of them.’

When, on the ‘glorious 28th’ of October, the nation narrowly voted Hughes’ referendum down, the result astonished and delighted the radicals, many of whom had secretly doubted
their chances. ‘This is our week,’ exulted the VSP. ‘It will be a week we shall look upon all the days of our lives.’

The galvanising effect of the ‘No’ victory even made itself felt at the Shop. If 1916 had been dominated by Menzies, 1917 was, as Hig later put it, ‘the rebels’ year’, in which the thin ranks of the varsity Left swelled with an influx of talented young Irish Catholics, radicalised by their opposition to conscription.

That year, Guido became vice-president of the Historical Society, with Hig his treasurer and, in its meetings, they joined the Catholic radicals in polemising against the Protestant bigots. In June, at the society’s biggest ever meeting, Guido announced his support for Ireland’s Easter uprising, delighting varsity Catholics but convincing Menzies and the Right that matters had slipped entirely out of control.

The most heated struggles took place in the pages of *MUM*. Dorothy Andrews, a relative moderate, held the editorial chair for 1917. With the Catholic activist Henry Minogue as a deputy editor and both Hig and Guido on the board of management, Menzies, who had previously dominated the magazine, suddenly became fair game, with the new *MUM* team examining both his ‘amazing amatory adventures’ and his career as a versifier (he was, they said, ‘up to his ears in grass dreaming o’er the daisy, browsing o’er the buttercup …’).

Minogue’s friend Clem Lazarus supplied a stinging rebuttal to Menzies’ description of university intellectuals guiding Australian democracy. He asked:

Aren’t they crowding round the portals, RGM
Melbourne’s poor, benighted mortals, RGM?
Don’t they, stamping, struggling, swaying,
Hungry for the latest news,
Lift their arms in anguish praying,
‘Give us Robert’s saving views.’

More importantly, *MUM* attacked the reactionary politics of the varsity staff. Guido reviewed a slim volume called *The Newer Imperialism, or Thoughts for the Times*, a survey of Australia’s social and economic problems, to which many of his professors had contributed, and declared that its reiteration of pro-war pieties ‘would do nothing to lessen the contempt in which the intelligent public holds the University, as a pedantic institution, out of touch with reality and far from the main currents of Australian life’.

Then, in an article entitled ‘Australian National Guilds’, he provided an exposition of the principles of guild socialism, largely unremarkable except for its opening paragraph. ‘The war, whatever the jingoes and junkers may tell us, is not primarily our affair,’ it began.

‘Essentially it is a European war, fought by the Allies against Germany to maintain the
balance of European power. And Australia is not Europe. This is the true explanation of our recruiting figures, the exact index of the nation’s war interest. Nevertheless, through a connection with the British Empire, on the whole rather tragic, the Commonwealth is deeply involved in the European cataclysm, and the event is for us, as for the rest of the world, well-nigh as significant as the fall of Lucifer.’

Dorothy Andrews expressed a certain unease about the sentiments, but the others reassured her and, indeed, the article seemed at first to have passed without comment from the student body.

On 11 June, Trinity’s Dr Leeper brought the May issue of the magazine before the University Council, complaining generally about its tone and specifically about articles by Minogue and Baracchi. The Professorial Board, conscious of Leeper’s twitchy determination, duly called on Guido ‘to explain his recent disloyal statements and to show cause why he should not be dealt with’. He, Minogue and Andrews were ordered to present themselves to a disciplinary hearing.

Minogue and Guido conferred.

‘Why not come with me,’ Minogue asked, ‘and I’ll introduce you to Dr Mannix? You can talk things over with him.’

Daniel Mannix, the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, had rallied his flock against the conscription referendum and even openly expressed his doubts about the morality of the war. Many respectable Australians saw him as an apologist for Ireland’s Sinn Fein and thus more or less a traitor; to Catholics, he’d become a symbol of faith and defiance. As Guido knew, Mannix had revealed an extraordinary ability to ride out controversy. For that reason alone, his advice would be worth having.

Minogue made the arrangements, and ushered Guido into the archbishop’s presence.

‘They’re saying Guido’s disloyal to the British Empire,’ Minogue told him.

Tall and thin and austere, Mannix looked down at Guido with all the dignity of his office.

‘You don’t want to be disloyal to the British Empire, do you?’ he asked.

Guido, who secretly regarded Mannix as the apex of disloyalty, remained puzzled until he considered the strange emphasis the archbishop placed on the word ‘want’. It was, he realised, a caution against provocation. Guido might think disloyalty was necessary—but that wasn’t the same as wanting it and so he shouldn’t admit to anything incriminating.

Fortified with a smidgin of Mannix’s cunning, Guido attended his disciplinary session. The stern-faced professors put it to him that he’d brought discredit upon the university and undermined the effort in France. The latter charge was particularly serious because Hughes’ legislation provided stiff penalties for uncensored remarks about the war. Fortunately, Harrison Moore, Guido’s old protector, had already contacted the military authorities about
the magazine. The abashed censor complained that Guido had shown him the manuscript ‘at a time when I was very rushed with work’—but he couldn’t deny having officially cleared the article.

Moore accordingly did his best to throw Guido a lifeline. Discussing the contention that the war was not primarily Australia’s concern, he asked, ‘You mean to stress the word primarily?’

Guido, remembering the archbishop, acknowledged that he did. He denied any intention to prejudice recruiting and explained that, while he did not feel he could encourage recruiting, neither did he feel justified in discouraging it—a position of studied neutrality not calculated to impress the professors.

When Guido left the room, the professors, after some discussion, agreed to give him a severe censure and a warning that further misconduct would mean expulsion. Dorothy Andrews received merely a fatherly lecture, while Henry Minogue was told his article was ‘a piece of bad manners and in exceedingly bad form’.

The affair seemed closed—until, three days later, the Saturday *Argus* entered the fray with an article that not only reproduced Guido’s offending paragraph but also added, in a calculated attempt to stir the pot, the quite untrue claim that ‘students of the University have expressed their indignation that such an article should have been published’.

The students had done no such thing—but the requisite indignation arrived in Monday’s mail-sack. A correspondent called ‘Loyalty’ counselled that ‘the authorities need to be watchful in these perilous times’ while ‘Common Sense’ denounced the MUM editors as morally incompetent, and the Professorial Board as ‘weak’.

A third letter came from Guido himself. He seemed to believe that the professors had themselves contacted the *Argus*, a perfidy that provoked him into exactly the sort of statement that Mannix had warned against, as he told the paper he would believe that people at the university thought the war to be primarily their affair only ‘when of those who talk and write so heroically about it, the young men decide to present themselves at recruiting depots, and the old men undertake some useful war work such as knitting socks’.

The next day, the *Argus* could barely find enough space for the university students professing their own loyalty and denouncing Guido as an ‘ingrate pro-German’.

The sudden, intense publicity spurred other, more powerful, forces into motion. Prime Minister Hughes, keen to dispel the perception that the privileged could escape the obligations the war imposed upon the poor, demanded action on the MUM case, sending the Crown Solicitor scrambling to find some grounds on which this Baracchi might be prosecuted.
At the Shop, Bob Menzies wrote a long article defending the war against ‘that brilliantly epigrammatic nationalist, Mr Guido Baracchi’. Britain and, by extension, Australia had, he insisted, gone to war only to defend Belgium and international law against German tyranny. ‘If Mr Baracchi would only look more closely at the hypocrisy, the callous breaking through of the ties of honour and law, the cynical Machiavellianism of those first dark days [in 1914],’ Menzies wrote, ‘he would have less to say about British capitalists, less to say about European politics, and a far keener appreciation of the national honour and moral loftiness of the Empire that shelters him.’

Within a matter of months, the new Soviet regime undermined the moral loftiness of the Empire by publishing the so-called secret treaties it had signed: the deal between Britain and Czarist Russia, in which the British traded the Dardanelles and Constantinople in exchange for Russian recognition of English interests elsewhere; the ‘Treaty of London’, which promised Italy large chunks of Austro-Hungary as an inducement to enter the war; the pact between Britain, France and Russia, which divided up Asiatic Turkey.

Still, Menzies at least responded to Guido’s arguments. Other students simply mocked him as a traitor with foreign parents. Hig even received an angry letter all the way from the trenches of France. ‘You can rest assured,’ wrote the soldier, ‘there are thousands of fellows over here—not merely university men, but real live white men—who would shudder to hear such disloyal expressions.’

When Harrison Moore summoned Guido to his office for an informal discussion, he was already under considerable pressure. Nettie Palmer had just learned from her friend Christian Jollie Smith, working in the Crown Law Office, of the preparations to have Guido prosecuted. Now Moore said flatly that he would certainly be expelled unless he immediately and publicly apologised. Guido, with very little room to manoeuvre, gave in. Under Moore’s direction, he sent the *Argus* a note retracting his ‘offensive and unfair’ remarks about the staff of the university knitting socks.

Unfortunately, earlier that day, he’d already posted another letter, responding to an *Argus* charge that he’d accused Australian soldiers of cowardice by explaining that he paid ‘homage to brave men whether they be Australian, English, German or Japanese’—and the suggestion that Germans (or even Japanese) might possess a bravery to equal the AIF did nothing to convey the impression of penitence.

Still, on Moore’s urging, the Professorial Board resolved to accept the apology, on the condition that Guido publish another declaration expressing his loyalty to the British Empire. So, on 24 July, he penned a short note. ‘Dear Sir,’ it ran, ‘I declare myself a loyal citizen of the British Empire.’ The next day, the Professorial Board sent the *Argus* a statement declaring the issue closed.
The professors might have been satisfied; the students most definitely were not. For weeks, flyers around the university had advertised that Guido would address the Historical Society’s 25 July meeting on ‘The Future of Trade Unionism’. From late afternoon on the day, a mob of loyalists gathered, eventually numbering about three hundred people waiting in the shade nearby.

As Guido walked towards the lecture hall, the students suddenly fell quiet. He tried to ignore them, to continue into the hall, and it seemed almost as if he would be allowed to enter, but, at the last minute, the pack stirred into action and someone physically seized him. The policeman who tried to intervene was casually knocked down, and the students dragged Guido towards the university pond and pushed him into the water. It reached only to his boot-tops and so some of the more aggressive patriots tried to trip him over, but others pulled him out again and insisted he explain himself.

After a babble of accusations about disgracing the university, they allowed Guido to respond. With his shoes dripping, and a hostile crowd hooting and laughing, he offered to apologise to anyone who took umbrage—but only if they had themselves enlisted. To those who enforced patriotism at home but didn’t themselves fight, he had nothing to say. Since, as the Age noted, most in the crowd fell precisely into that category, the offer engendered a storm of faux outrage but also a certain shame-faced confusion, in the midst of which Guido walked, boots squelching, into the lecture hall.

The meeting went ahead and he managed to deliver most of his speech before the patriots returned—this time under the leadership of ‘a youth of good muscular development and a soldier’.

In true British fashion, the students appointed a chairman to stand with Guido on a stone plinth and explain that the article did not represent the general student opinion. The loyalty of the Shop was at stake. Amidst catcalls, hoots and abuse, Guido was called on to apologise.

‘If students will indicate which portion of my article in the University Magazine you object to, I will explain,’ he began, but was cut off by shouts of ‘Apologise!’

He tried again. ‘In my mind there was nothing offensive in it; at least nothing offensive was intended.’

‘Do the right thing,’ shouted someone. ‘Apologise!’

Clearly shaken, he backed down a little. ‘If my sentiments are resented by students,’ he said, at last, ‘I apologise for having published them.’ But, with considerable courage, he made clear that he would not change his own opinions, not even under threats of violence.

‘A man could not sell his soul,’ he told them.

With that, they had to be content.
Guido’s student career was effectively over. He resigned from the board of *MUM*. He forwarded a carefully worded letter to the magazine expressing contrition not for his views but for expressing them in a student publication. Rather than print it, Dorothy Andrews simply reported that Guido had apologised.

Nettie thought Guido had been shabbily treated by his erstwhile allies. ‘To me,’ she told Hig, ‘it looks as if the magazine shed Baracchi, though he was more than a casual contributor, and goes on its way rejoicing while he had to apologise for acting like the rest of you. I still can’t see why you three don’t go on strike, insisting on the printing of Baracchi’s letter.’

The reason, quite simply, was that they were intimidated. Guido’s ordeal had featured prominently in all the Melbourne newspapers, and though the press had reported the affair as a varsity lark, everyone knew that being manhandled by an angry mob was a frightening experience. The wide publicity ensured that Guido’s humiliation achieved its desired aim, destroying for a generation the early stirrings of student radicalism and warning other would-be rebels to watch their words. The best the shell-shocked Hig could manage was to convince Andrews, in return for the suppression of Guido’s second piece, to drop Menzies’ long anti-Baracchi polemic.

With Guido so publicly shamed, the prosecution under preparation by the Attorney-General was allowed to lapse. But Guido was neither forgiven nor forgotten. The military censor who, from about this time, began intercepting Guido’s mail, referred to him as ‘a dangerously disloyal person who gained some wholly unenviable notoriety some months ago’, a fairly accurate summation of Guido’s reputation in respectable society. Within the Shop, a new verse appeared in the unofficial varsity song so that, at commencement, freshmen celebrated an incident already becoming legend:

Prof Berry is out for blood!
He’s called for his sword and lackey,
And he won’t rest till he sits on the chest
Of the patriot, Guido Baracchi!

The incident at *MUM* provided the backdrop to Guido’s later imprisonment. It was why he mattered, both to the Left and to the Right. After his ducking, he’d become a widely known symbol of the radicalising intelligentsia, for both radicals and conservatives.
In March 1918, with the imprisoned Guido a symbol of the repression that war had brought, his friends hastened to show their solidarity, journeying up to Coburg to visit their comrade.

Within the Victorian Socialist Party, Guido belonged to an intellectual, artistic coterie, with whom he drank red wine in cheap Italian restaurants like Fasoli’s, Belloti’s, the Latin Café and the Florence. ‘Are these Bohemian places of resort under observation?’ cried a military censor conscious that discussions over pasta and garlic bread could easily turn from the pleasures of art to the horrors of war.

Before his arrest, Guido had spent many evenings at Cole’s book arcade, waiting for its manager, Frank Wilmot, to close his counter. Wilmot wrote poetry under the pen name ‘Furnley Maurice’ and his beautiful ‘To God: from the weary nations’ captured the disgust and dismay he felt over the European carnage. ‘Our heroes lost in trenches or the wave,’ he wrote, ‘Are dust or rag, but no more dead than we,/Consigning to this universal grave/All that is known of trust and charity.’

With Wilmot, Guido would usually find Henry Tate, a cadaverous musician whose compositions evoked the bird songs of Emerald, the novelist and architect Conrad Sayce and the poet Frederick Macartney. Together, they’d attend a meeting of the Literary Club (which they’d helped found), or go to Sayce’s slab shack in Wallan on the outskirts of Melbourne for long arguments over books, politics and philosophy.

Now the socialist poets left the cafés and came to the gaol, where they joined Nettie and Pietro in the prison waiting room, and their arcane discussions of metre and rhyme and other matters poetical served to convince two nearby soldiers they were speaking thieves’ cant. The authorities, perhaps unsurprisingly, decided almost at once that Prisoner Baracchi had seen enough people, and barred thereafter everyone but Pietro from weekly visits.

The prohibition secretly delighted the elder Baracchi. ‘From this time onwards,’ he wrote, ‘no one was allowed with me on my weekly visits and so I had Guido all to myself.’

Despite the social embarrassment of a gaolbird son, Pietro, as always, backed ‘the boy’ to the hilt.
‘I think he’s probably a pretty lonely man and I’m sure he’s charming and friendly,’ wrote Nettie to Vance, after Pietro had visited her to discuss the situation. ‘He seems to want to like Guido’s friends …’

Pietro did indeed come to think highly of both the Palmers. Later, Guido told Nettie, ‘You and Vance seem to have won my old man’s heart. He speaks of you almost every time I see him.’

The affection grew with Nettie’s willingness to enlighten Pietro about the hitherto baffling activities of his son, which the scientist now investigated with the rigour he might in other circumstances apply to a new moon or passing comet. As Nettie told Vance: ‘Mr B questioned me about all possible societies and movements as we were going back to town. You’d have chuckled at my succinct replies. “What is the Socialist Party?” “The Labor College?” “The IWW?” and women’s movement, too. I hadn’t time to wonder if he was at all pulling my leg or what he would prefer me to reply. He’s an old dear, anyhow. Says that on every occasion, Guido has beaten him in argument and been right.’

But there were other, more sensitive, matters about his wayward son that Pietro wished to broach—and they mostly concerned the boy’s marriage.

Kathleen Baracchi (universally known as ‘Toby’) was young and beautiful: when Nettie first saw her, she’d openly admired her ‘lovely face and body like the changes of a cloud’. But Toby had only been married to Guido for a month when he was arrested, and Pietro didn’t know quite what to make of his daughter-in-law.

‘Her mother is a Russian, and her father who died some years ago is a cousin of the Tobins of Alma Road,’ he wrote, after the wedding, ‘but they do not admit any relationship.’

What bothered him even more than her pedigree was her attitude towards Guido. Toby had come with Pietro on his first visits to the prison, even importuning the governor on her husband’s behalf. Then, in early March, she’d suddenly left for Sydney—a decision that utterly scandalised Pietro. Her ostensible purpose was to see relatives but he couldn’t understand why she’d go on social calls when her new husband was languishing in gaol. Toby’s brother had borrowed considerable money from Guido; Pietro now suspected the entire Tobin clan of mercenary motives, and so he sought Nettie’s opinion.

As she explained to Vance, she ‘tried to console him, the very fine brick’, but there was little she could say. No matter how much she liked ‘Mr B’, she could scarcely discuss with the father the promiscuities of the son—even though they almost certainly provided the trigger for Toby’s departure.

Whether Pietro knew that Guido already had an illegitimate son is unclear. In 1914, as Guido made his way home from Britain, he had embarked on his own Wellsian adventure, in the form of a casual encounter with a Romany girl in Hungary. It should have been simple, an uncomplicated and mutually satisfying relationship between two civilised and equal
individuals that came to its natural conclusion when Guido left for Italy to visit Pietro’s family.

And so it was—until Guido received word that his gypsy lover expected a child.

Under the circumstances there was little he could do. He discovered he would be a father just as he learned that Hungary and Australia were at war. He could neither write, visit nor send money to a woman in enemy territory. His ship was leaving and he sailed with it, leaving his pregnant lover behind. He saw neither mother nor child again, despite later efforts to find them, and it seems likely both perished in the turmoil of post-war Hungary.

Guido’s romance with the novelist Katharine Susannah Prichard arose out of equally turbulent circumstances. At the end of 1915, Guido had accompanied his university friend Tristram Busst to Fremantle, a waystation on Busst’s journey to enlist in Britain. Guido joined the shipboard farewell party, and drank so deeply of the occasion that he only awoke, many hours later, to the groaning turbines of a vessel miles out at sea.

He left the ship in Ceylon, its first port of call, where, as he aimlessly walked the streets of Colombo, he encountered a tea planter, staggering home in a gin-fuelled rage. The man knocked him unconscious but his fury gave way to a hung-over remorse, and he ensconced Guido as a guest on his enormous plantation. When Guido eventually boarded the first P & O liner that could take him back to Melbourne, he wore a borrowed pith-helmet and his benefactor’s tropical whites and Katharine, returning in triumph from London after winning a literary prize with *The Pioneers*, sighed in dismay at the sight of yet another reactionary colonialist. Only when the voyage was underway did she discover that the young man she’d taken for an empty-headed planter could talk with as much confidence about the poet Bernard O’Dowd as about the case for female suffrage.

War had temporarily converted Katharine to a conventional patriotism, but a journalistic tour of hospitals in which each bed displayed the ghastly handiwork of Mauser bullets and mustard gas shook her faith in the conflict, and she leapt at the chance to discuss the world’s confusion with this sympathetic stranger. She was, according to a journalist at that time, ‘slim and willowy’, opinionated and independent; Guido was, equally, suave and witty, and their deckside conversations progressed, perhaps inevitably, from the idiom of politics to the language of love.

Guido was not a seducer, at least not in any conventional sense. His charm, as Betty Roland would later write, lay in his ‘gift of being able to efface himself, to put aside his masculine aggressiveness and become the listener, the sympathetic, gentle, understanding recipient of confidences’. In London’s Freewoman Discussion Circle, Katharine had heard the arguments condemning marriage as a crass economic bargain. Guido’s views didn’t shock her and, by the time they docked in Australia, she was in love.
Melbourne’s small artistic community showered Katharine with accolades throughout early 1916, but her mother, even though she remained unaware that Guido visited the family home in the early hours of the morning to whistle arias outside Katharine’s bedroom, still detected signs of ‘a broken heart, or a disastrous love affair’. Katharine deflected this maternal concern by taking herself off to a cottage by the beach. ‘What to say? What to do?’ she scribbled in her notebook. ‘Anything or everything equally futile … Does he feel as I do? Is he plagued like this? Is there rest or peace for him?’

She absorbed herself in the beauty of the coastline, but its rugged grandeur provided only a temporary balm. ‘I have offered three long blue days on the altar of my feeling for you, whatever it is,’ she wrote. ‘Three days, lying on my back under the ti trees, gazing at the sky. So blue blue it is under the ti trees. My soul wanders its fields, crying like a child … It cries your name, just that word. Why I don’t know—or all that it means.’

When Guido joined her, she revelled in a passion she compared to the swelling ocean. ‘His eyes were like the sea today—the same colour grey-blue and almost chopped up into little watchful waves.’ Yet she felt no more certain as to where the affair would lead.

Nearly fifty years later, Guido told Katharine’s son that his affection for Katharine never diminished from the moment they met. Yet throughout Guido’s life, affection and fidelity remained quite different matters, as Katharine seems to have discovered.

‘One drinks one’s own tears,’ she wrote, presumably after a demonstration of his faithlessness, ‘but tears are a poor drink. They increase thirst—and are bad for the digestion.’

Later in the year, Hugo Throssell, a strapping war hero Katharine had met in London, briefly returned from the front, and swept her off her feet for ‘days of whirlwind love-making’. But she couldn’t entirely quell her feelings for Guido, haunted by ‘blue eyes, the colour of forget-me-nots … The blue in them is a finer flower and the pupils large and dark as his soul is. They have long lashes and even when I hate him I love his eyes’.

Their affair continued into 1917, when Hugo returned to the front and Katharine moved back into a little cottage in Emerald.

‘Guido came to see me on Monday,’ she confessed to her good friend Nettie Palmer. ‘We spent all Tuesday together and he caught the train back on Wednesday … The party was indiscreet, dear, but innocent to a degree and I cannot tell you what it meant to us both. Mother would have hysterics if she heard of it—so the information is just for you, dear. We had two perfect blue days wandering about the hills. I am better in mind and body than I have been for a very long time.’

Though she’d made no promises to Hugo, his letters, with their implicit expectations, followed her, even as she wandered the hills with Guido. Conscious of Hugo’s much more conventional ideas of romance, Katharine realised she would have to choose between them—
and that, however pleasurable his company, Guido would never provide the stability Hugo offered.

‘Some men are licensed and retail undiluted essences of hell,’ she told herself. ‘They do it to the best of their ability. They are a danger to society, public nuisances. They ought to be locked up.’

With considerable anguish, she allowed the affair with Guido to subside into a friendship.

The day after Guido’s marriage to Toby in January 1918, Katharine visited Nettie and complained to her of an appalling headache. ‘Sat outside,’ wrote Nettie, ‘and K said her illness had decided her that she needed a rest in the country …’

A year later, Katharine married Hugo—who remained sufficiently suspicious about the goings-on in his absence to thereafter always refer to Guido as his wife’s ‘greasy, hand-kissing dago’.

Yet it was not Guido’s history with Katharine that explained Toby’s sudden flight in 1918. What Pietro didn’t know—and Nettie couldn’t explain—was that up to, and even after, his marriage, Guido had pursued an affair with Lesbia Keogh, the woman who so admired his speech that day on the Yarra Bank.

He’d seen Lesbia in 1915 in Harrison Moore’s law lectures, where she sat in front of him. She was small and dark; he’d noticed her graceful, gliding motion and the slight smile on her faintly bluish lips, but he never actually spoke to her during their time together at the Shop.

Lesbia suffered from a heart condition that prevented her blood from properly oxygenating and would, she knew, eventually kill her. The doctors predicted a life expectancy of about thirty, a grim diagnosis confirmed each time she tried to climb the stairs to the lecture theatre and found herself straining for breath. Still, Lesbia possessed a steely determination that allowed her to sail through exams in a male-dominated law school, even as she privately explored an array of ideas never admitted into a respectable classroom.

Her middle-class family’s descent into poverty after her alcoholic father’s desertion perhaps fuelled Lesbia’s passion for politics. Even before the war began, she and her young brother Esmond were debating ethics and reading plays at the Free Religious Fellowship, a discussion circle run by the radical parson Frederick Sinclaire. At the Shop, Lesbia formed a passionate friendship with the auburn haired philosophy tutor Katie Lush, another Fellowship member. In her private notebook, Lesbia wrote of her love for Katie:

I can’t feel the sunshine
Or see the stars aright
For thinking of her beauty
And her kisses bright.
Together, they tried to counter Dr Leeper’s effort to whip up anti-German sentiment throughout the university. The warden had targeted a German lecturer, Walter von Dechend, who was supposed to have gloated in class over the fate of British battle cruisers. Leeper went to the Australian Intelligence Corps, claiming that von Dechend possessed a photographic development room, a safe deposit and an alternative identity as ‘Herr Walter’. None of it was true but von Dechend lost his position. Walter Scharf, a talented piano player, was dismissed from the music department and detained in a POW camp.

Katie wrote to MUM calling the decision ‘pitiful’; Lesbia gathered signatures to an open letter in von Dechend’s defence and, in the early meetings of the Historical Society, she debated Menzies almost single-handedly.

By the time Guido came to the Historical Society, Lesbia had dismissed the entire university as intellectually stultifying and morally compromising. She found instead a job in a clothing factory: not because she saw toil as ennobling, but precisely because she felt its tedium a burden she was ethically obliged to share.

‘Certain ways of living are wrong,’ she told a meeting of the Free Religious Fellowship. ‘The life of a typist, the life of a clerk, the life of a merchant, a doctor, a lawyer, seem to some of us pretty well immoral. We don’t like to think that we live in houses other people have built for us, eat clothes other people have made for us, eat bread other people have baked for us and that in return for all this service we have added a few figures or talked for a couple of hours.’

Her audience might have thought the ‘we’ a little presumptive, since few other Fellowship members felt the need to follow their Tolstoyan convictions to such uncomfortable conclusions. Yet, by 1916, Lesbia was working as a machinist, sustaining herself by a bottle of heart-tonic next to her bench.

Guido and Lesbia became friends later that year when, in the aftermath of the first referendum victory, the bookseller Ellis Bird proposed launching a new review of politics, literature and art, and they both attended the inconclusive organising committee.

He had never met anyone like her, a woman who overcame so fearlessly the canyon that separated the university and the working class. She kept dangerous company, too, openly admiring the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World, whose twelve central leaders had already been arrested (initially for treason, later for incendiaryism) even before the referendum. In her workplace, she agitated for the appointment of a female organiser within the Clothing and Allied Trades Union—and then campaigned again to secure equal pay for the position.

If she lacked Guido’s depth of theory, she knew, far more than he, how to fight. ‘Lesbia was a lovely girl,’ he remembered, nearly fifty years later. ‘She was very Irish-Australian, you know, very warm and romantic, and at the same time very straightforward indeed. She
would never concede anything that she did not thoroughly believe, she’d just contradict it. But she’d do it in a nice way, and she was universally liked. Everyone who knew her liked her very much.’

For Lesbia, Guido was one of the few men who could talk to her of poetry and art without recoiling from her politics, especially now that factory work isolated her from most educated progressives. Lesbia’s co-worker May Francis told how they had once caucused in ‘an exclusive women’s club’—almost certainly the Forerunners Club, to which Lesbia’s beloved Katie Lush belonged—only to be warned by a member not to get the club mixed up with trade unionism. ‘[This] would,’ recalled May, ‘have been viewed as a scandal of first magnitude by the “intellectual” lady members.’

Guido, on the other hand, fully approved of unionism, and, if IWW-ism went a good deal further than his own guild socialism, he still agreed with much that Lesbia said about it. Most of all, he could listen—and that mattered, since underneath her hard political carapace, she hid deep insecurities. Bright from a young age, but saddled with infirmity, she’d yearned for the fullness of life, rather than the invalid’s withered portion. She wanted to dance. She wanted boyfriends. She wanted, eventually, children. But the doctors ruled out motherhood, and Lesbia secretly feared that her heart made even romance impossible. Catching a tram left her exhausted in the gutter. How would she ever trip across a ballroom? Her apolitical sister Estelle, more conventionally beautiful, romanced a steady stream of boys; according to her brother Es, Lesbia ‘would have given anything to be like Estelle’.

When Es went into army camp in late 1914, his army friends provided Lesbia’s first interactions with young men and he, who adored his sister, cringed at her clumsy imitation of Estelle’s coquetry. She developed an infatuation with a trumpeter in the unit and wrote passionate poems about him—even though he, an uneducated working-class boy, found the attentions of a radical woman with a university degree utterly terrifying.

By the time she met Guido, Lesbia had made her break from Estelle’s priorities and she seemed the perfect girl militant, carelessly flouting conventions of gender and class. Underneath, though, the corrosive self-doubt still lurked, and the sensitivity with which Guido paid attention to her was irresistible.

In return, she led him further into working-class politics. She had been tutoring rough workingmen from the IWW in English expression in a room above Andrade’s, the radical bookshop in Bourke Street. Because of her heart condition, Percy Laidler, the shop manager and IWW leader, had to carry her bodily up the stairs, but her education and background provided as much of a barrier as her health. ‘She was a dainty middle-class lass,’ said much later the communist Norman Jeffrey, one of her students. ‘It puzzled me why she identified herself with the IWW … [The classes] didn’t do any of us much good but it was interesting for a bloke like me.’
Nonetheless, she was well enough accepted to introduce Guido to Laidler, a nuggety man with the muscled torso of a physical culturist. Despite the persecution the IWW faced, Laidler was still free. As the censor lamented, he reaped ‘a rich harvest by supplying all and sundry with literature, and filling in his spare time by helping the disloyal and undesirable in any mischief they may be contemplating’.

Andrade’s functioned as an organising centre as much as a business. The periodicals on the shelves quoted Liebknecht and Luxemburg, Connolly and Maclean, Big Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Tom Barker and Donald Grant: rebels of every stripe and the agitators of three continents. Even Andrade’s sideline in conjuring tricks and under-the-counter contraceptives hinted at rebellion: the former evolving from rationalist efforts to expose fraudulent mystics, and the latter a challenge to bourgeois sexual propriety. On Friday evenings, the shop’s clientele spilled out into Bourke Street, forming into small knots of contention on the pavement or settling down at the tables of the Anglo-American Café next door: anarchists, socialists, syndicalists and Labor men arguing their creeds into the night.

One of the louder voices in the kerbside debates belonged to Bill Earsman, a man Lesbia knew well. Bewitched by his thick Scots accent and natty attire (he favoured tan shoes, leather gaiters and a Baden-Powell hat), she’d been briefly in love with him, but the infatuation waned as she compared the blood and fire he breathed in radical circles to the moderation he counselled as an official in the engineering union. Guido, though, meeting Earsman for the first time, saw only his unlimited energy, his evident ability to make things happen.

Earsman planned what he called a ‘Labor College’: an institute that provided radical education to workers, encouraging them to fight for social change rather than lifting them out of their class. He knew unionists who’d back it. What he needed were educated men, the basis for a teaching staff. Maurice Blackburn, the lawyer and Left-wing Labor parliamentarian, had declared his availability. So had the Fellowship’s Frederick Sinclaire. What about Guido? Would he join the Labor College?

Guido knew himself the frustration of inadequate direction; he remembered Dick Berry and his skeletons. Here, at last, was his chance to contribute to the movement, an opportunity to put his relentless reading to some use. He would become a teacher.

In early 1917, he moved to a flat in Collins Street, which gave him far more autonomy and allowed him to move at ease between separate sets of friends. ‘Baracchi a versatile bird,’ noted Hig, with perhaps a hint of jealousy, ‘different to everybody.’ He dined and drank with Macartney, Wilmot and their coterie and continued to dally with Katharine Susannah Prichard, even as his friendship with Lesbia grew.

At the Shop, Guido’s involvement with the Labor College provoked only incredulity mingled with scorn, and one of Menzies’ friends produced a sarcastic ode in which Guido
advised his ‘toil-stained brethren’ as to how to ‘chuck up work’. He didn’t care. The furore over his anti-war MUM article and the ducking that followed only confirmed Lesbia’s stance on the bankruptcy of the university.

The more time he spent with her, the more he realised how deep her iconoclasm ran. He talked to her of Ramiro de Maeztu’s dismissal of personal agency in favour of social function; she, temperamentally wedded to political involvement as, first and foremost, a moral commitment, found the idea repugnant. Enthusing over Marx’s dissection of classical economics, he read her a passage explaining profit as the creation of surplus value; she responded simply, ‘I don’t believe it’s really true.’

For her part, she came to trust him more and more. As Betty Roland wrote, years later, ‘when Guido looked at you with that rapt expression so peculiarly his, he made you feel that, to him, you were the only person of importance in the world’. On a picnic in the Dandenongs, Lesbia sang to him, for the first time, some of her poetry, which few of her friends even knew she wrote.

Her doubts about their future pertained more to Guido’s readiness for a relationship than to her own. Despite its defeat in the first conscription referendum, the Hughes government had been returned in the elections of May 1917. Its Unlawful Associations Act of late July made membership of the IWW a crime punishable by six months imprisonment, with the onus of proof resting on the defendant. The imminent crackdown had spurred Lesbia to formally take out IWW membership, not because she expected the Act would be defeated but precisely because she sensed it would not, and thought it right to share the fate of those unjustly punished.

‘We’ll walk in darkness, obscure, despised,’ she predicted. ‘We’ll mourn each other at prison gates.’

Thinking of Guido, she scribbled:

The love I look for
Could not come for you
My mind is set to fall
At Peterloo.

She was bracing for repression—‘Peterloo’, after the massacre of Manchester workers in 1819—and she baulked at involving Guido in the coming cataclysm, no matter what she saw ‘dawning in/Deep eyes of blue’.

The Sydney IWW did face mass arrests but the weaker Melbourne branch chose instead to dissolve their organisation, thinking they would constitute it later in a different form, under a different name. The strategy worked no better than Sydney’s head-on approach—but it did avoid the gaolings that Lesbia had expected.
In any case, as the IWW fell apart, the working class began to stir. In July 1917, a strike in New South Wales spread from the transport unions into the mines and then onto the wharfs. In Melbourne, the solidarity of waterside workers with their interstate comrades evolved into a dispute over the demeaning system by which the bosses organised dockside pick-ups. Drivers refused to move black cargo, and the coal lumpers—central to a low-tech economy—walked off the job.

‘The enemies of Britain and her allies have succeeded in plunging Australia into a general strike …’ announced the New South Wales state government in August. ‘At the back of the strike lurks the IWW and the exponents of direct action. Without realising it, many trade unions have become the tools of Disloyalists and Revolutionaries … Every striker is singing from day to day the hymns of the IWW and marching to their music.’

The embattled Wobblies could scarcely lead such an immense strike, but their slogans—or echoes of them—found their way onto the lips of many rank-and-file unionists, and the more far-sighted conservatives recognised a mood transcending the normal concerns of trade unionism. The Argus, surveying the chaos around the country, summed up: ‘There is only one question: who shall rule?’

As the strike raged on the docks, another battle took place on the streets. Throughout August, working-class women protesting surging food prices marched through a city dimmed by coal shortages, jeering at scabs enrolling at the Athenaeum Hall, listening to speakers from the Socialist Party and singing ‘The Red Flag’. On the waterfront, unionists fought the blacklegs with boots and pieces of road metal, while a recruiting sergeant speaking at a rally in Echuca voiced the conviction of many employers: ‘Agitators who were stirring up industrial strife at the present juncture should be taken out and shot as traitors to their country.’

The simmering violence, despite Lesbia’s hesitations, brought her and Guido closer together. It was a mass struggle now, no longer a skirmish between the IWW and the police, and she couldn’t protect him even if she wanted. In any case, he was—perhaps to her surprise—in his element. He spent his Sundays on the Yarra Bank, the traditional ‘university of the working class’, where thousands of workers listened and compared the agitators of the Left in an open air forum; he marched in the enormous rally that snaked along the river on 3 September; he debated strategy with anyone and everyone.

In the second part of 1917, he moved from his shared Collins Street flat to Oxford Chambers in Bourke Street: a shift, not exactly into the slums, but away from student digs and into a building often used for Literary Club meetings, which he shared with an assortment of rebels including Nettie’s friend Christian Jollie Smith. Christian practised law at a time when the profession remained almost entirely barred to women; later, after losing her legal post, she
became Melbourne’s first ever female cab driver. The military censor described Christian as the ‘seemingly harum-scarum daughter of a highly respectable father’ (Thomas Jollie Smith was a Presbyterian minister) but, despite her own radicalism, she’d been initially suspicious of Nettie’s enthusiasm for Guido. ‘He has not the sort of face one can remember …’ she complained. Even after their formal introduction, she gave Nettie a non-committal answer when asked directly if she liked Baracchi.

But as neighbours, Christian and Guido became at once very close, going bushwalking together, and returning to Melbourne to spend the night reading poetry and talking. ‘At 5.30 a.m. we went out for a walk,’ Guido explained to Nettie, ‘sat in the Fitzroy Gardens till 7 and at 7 had breakfast at Canberra cafe, a workman’s early morning eating house in Exhibition Street. We had two more eggs and bacon. Then we walked to the docks and sat down by the river till tea. At ten we came back here and parted.’

Meanwhile, Guido’s work at the Labor College, where Katharine Prichard had enrolled as the first student, drew him deeper into political theory. Guido’s economics class contained about ten students, mostly trade unionists, sitting for intensive weekly sessions in two- or three-hour blocks. In his methodical way, he devoted hours to creating a syllabus around Marxist economics, discovering along the way both a talent and a passion for teaching, and laying the basis for what would become an encyclopaedic knowledge of Marx’s writings.

The weeks passed, crowded with meetings, caucuses and demonstrations—and in the midst of it all, Lesbia and Guido became lovers.

The impact on the sexually and emotionally unsophisticated Lesbia was overwhelming. Betty Roland, far more experienced when she met Guido, listed the qualities he brought to their relationship. ‘Charm, sympathy, a brilliant mind, sophistication, tenderness,’ she wrote. ‘Particularly tenderness. There was no more wonderful experience in life than to be loved by [Guido]—you were wrapped by a blanket of love, you felt secure, you didn’t have to worry any longer.’

Security was precisely what Lesbia lacked, and the promise of it sustained her through the tedium of her labour. For her, Guido’s Hungarian son became, not evidence of past promiscuity, but a symbol of her union with Guido and, as such, a talisman against the factory’s grind:

All through the day at my machine
There still keeps going
A strange little tune through heart and head
As I sit sewing:
‘There is a child I love in Hungary,
A child I love in Hungary’
The words come flowing.

When the struggle permitted, she and Guido walked together in the bush. They argued. They talked of ideas, of people, of books. Guido lent Lesbia a copy of Frederick Macartney’s *Commercium*, a collection of clever, satirical poems about the business world. Lesbia responded with characteristic intelligence. The irony in *Commercium* depended on reader and writer privately acknowledging the absurdity of poetry about business. But shouldn’t poets, she asked, write about what they knew? The task of the writer, especially the radical writer, lay not in dismissing the world but in understanding it and so grasping its inner potential for change. As she told Guido, though she was a factory girl, she couldn’t hate factories, since upon them the hope of a post-capitalist future depended. She responded to *Commercium* with a simpler but far superior poem, born of watching, in 1917, Melbourne’s solidities melt away into the air:

Into old rhyme
The new words come but shyly.
Here’s a brave man
Who sings of commerce dryly.

Swift-gliding cars
Through town and country winging,
Like cigarettes,
Are deemed unfit for singing.

Into old rhyme
New words come tripping slowly.
Hail to the time
When they possess it wholly.

May Francis, working alongside Lesbia, knew as much as anyone of her relationship with Guido, since they habitually lightened their labour with whispered confidences. May liked Guido (they remained lifelong friends) but thought him physically unprepossessing. When, towards the end of her life, she pondered his appeal to women, she wrote: ‘I did know from Lesbia of what was the likely reason [why Guido was so attractive] … in a few cases, at least, I assumed it could be attributed to another reason [than his looks].’

The coyness suggests Lesbia spoke of Guido’s sexual talents. Her poetry certainly makes clear the passion she felt for a man who was, in all likelihood, her first lover, contrasting his ‘hot and passionate ways’ with ‘the starry loves/ Of virgin days’. Despite the strikes and the riots and the social turmoil, she wrote few political poems during this time. Sex was new to her. The struggle wasn’t, and so she sang of love rather than rebellion.
If Lesbia found in Guido an escape from the political stresses she’d endured for so long, his feelings for her were thoroughly enmeshed with the tumult around them. He’d been taught to see the working class almost as a different species, and he’d been able to accept Wellsian socialism because it promised change without relying upon a labourer who, from the perspective of a Grammar boy, still seemed half-devil and half-child. The *New Age* had convinced him that the wild energy of the proletariat could be constructive, but only when tamed and channelled through the guilds, just as steam might drive machinery if correctly funnelled through a turbine. Now Lesbia showed him the IWW’s anarchic celebration of working-class creativity, a philosophy that embraced the larrikin rank and file because of—and not despite—their rude vigour.

She initiated him into a radically different understanding of political agency, and it inevitably shaped the way he saw her. He liked Lesbia. He found her attractive. But he could not separate the relationship from its context, and when he later spoke of her, he remembered ‘the rebel girl’—a phrase taken from Joe Hill’s chorus about the women of the IWW: ‘It’s great to fight for freedom/ with a rebel girl.’

That fight for freedom was only part of Lesbia, but her deeper uncertainties lay masked behind the political bravery that gave her such credibility with Guido. When, at a Socialist Party meeting, he declared that the imprisoned IWW leaders possessed ‘the heroic spirit of the early Christians’, he was clearly speaking in Lesbia’s voice, just as, when he briefly took a job in a bootmaking factory, he was spurred by her example—even if his proletarian career came to an inglorious end after a week or so.

She stirred ‘my mind deeply,’ he wrote, ‘and … set my imagination on fire’.

Though the government, with a mixture of cunning and coercion, saw off both the strikes and the demonstrations of August and September, the political climate scarcely eased, since the defeat of the unions emboldened Hughes for one more desperate gamble. In October, the third battle of Ypres alone cost 38 000 Australian casualties. Reinforcements simply could not keep pace with the carnage and Hughes announced a new referendum on conscription on 7 November 1917—the same day that Australian newspapers carried the initial, confused reports of the Russian revolution.

The radicals entered the second referendum in a mood of deep pessimism. The first referendum had been only narrowly defeated and then, in its wake, Hughes had won an election, outlawed the IWW and smashed the biggest strike in Australian history. Now, he’d worded the ballot to avoid any mention of conscription (the paper simply asked whether the voter favoured sending reinforcements to the troops) and set the poll for a weekday to minimise the working vote, with the electoral rolls closing a bare two days after the
announcement of the referendum, so that there was almost no time for ‘Antis’ to galvanise their supporters.

‘I remember well,’ wrote Guido, ‘the initial despondency I shared with so many: “We’re licked this time,” I said to myself but to no one else.’

In the campaign that followed, Guido spoke on the Yarra Bank each Sunday, often beside Lesbia who, though her heart limited her effectiveness as a soapboxer, insisted on taking her share of platform work. In the midst of the campaign, a throat infection sent her to hospital but, as Guido admiringly noted, ‘after a day or two there, she declared herself well enough to go home, but was sternly forbidden to do so. However, she bribed a maid to bring her clothes, donned them, and like the Arabs, silently stole away, only to break her silence the very next night from a soapbox’.

Politics threw Guido and Lesbia together, but the intense campaigning of November and December also brought its own tensions to their relationship. Guido enrolled in a scheme of Earsman’s to bring the ‘No’ case to isolated rural areas, and left for Gippsland with Frederick Sinclaire and the shaggy poet RH Long, who had much earlier explained how:

I do not believe in
A peace that is made
With the Maxim, the bomb
And the bayonet blade.

I cannot quite see how
Goodwill can arise
By bashing in brains or
By gouging out eyes.

Their expedition culminated in Mirboo North where, as Guido and Sinclaire tried to put the case against conscription, loyalists pelted them with tomatoes, until they eventually escaped by car ‘through a street where some fights were still in progress and a road along which a considerable crowd chased us … out of that colourful town’.

Around the same time, Lesbia and May visited Katharine Prichard’s Emerald cottage to discuss ‘the class struggle and the social revolution throughout the night’. Almost certainly, Lesbia and Katharine compared notes on Guido, so that Lesbia returned full of foreboding.

‘I’m afraid he’ll some day stop loving me,’ she wrote:

All of them say
He’ll some day stop loving me –
That’s how he’s made
If I upbraid
And say he’ll stop loving me
He always swears he’ll never stop loving me
But I’m afraid.

Still, Lesbia didn’t shrink from her rejection of conventional matrimony. ‘My loves are free to do the things they please,’ she said, in a different poem, ‘By day or by night.’

She and Guido loved underneath the sign of the Russian revolution, abominated by conservatives from its first days for threatening the sanctity of marriage, and applauded—by some radicals, at least—for exactly the same reason. If the Bolsheviks sent every human institution spinning on its axis, why shouldn’t love itself be remade?

In 1917, few Australians understood much about Lenin and his comrades, other than that they spoke of peace when the leaders of every nation demanded war. The Australian Workers Union, the biggest working-class organisation in the country, editorialised: ‘Lenin and Russia have brought joy and hope to a world writhing in pain, bloodshed and misery.’ The Soviets themselves might have been thousands of miles away but, during the anti-conscription campaign, revolution—however vaguely defined—hung in the Melbourne air and, on the Yarra Bank with the newly formed Anti-Conscription Army, Guido let himself dream of ‘emulating the Russian Red Guards’.

On conscription, the tide seemed to be turning their way. When ‘Yes’ campaigners organised in the Melbourne Cricket Ground a last mass rally, tirelessly promoted by the newspapers, working-class voters infiltrated the stands, greeted the Prime Minister with stones and bottles, and drowned out his speech with jeers. ‘In the arena,’ gloated the Labor Call, ‘all one could see or hear of Hughes was a wild little man swinging his long arms in acrobatic fashion, reminding you of the jumping-jack of our childhood.’

Still, the ‘No’ activists faced an almost universal opposition from the press. Guido and his university friend Henry Minogue travelled to Geelong to spruik and attracted a huge crowd in the market square. Guido pleaded with passers-by to oppose Hughes and his ‘ring of political brigands’; the Geelong Advertiser’s headline charged that the two ‘No’-men ‘Seem Prepared to Let Huns Win and Ravage Australia’. The Melbourne papers maintained the same tone, with column after column of exhortations, threats of dire consequences of a ‘No’ vote and appeals to patriotism, honour and masculinity.

‘Are there any noes?’ asked Nettie Palmer, despairingly, as she walked out to vote on the ‘shimmering hot day’ of 20 December. Much to her surprise, there were. Victoria joined New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia in giving a majority for No, while the overall margin more than doubled since the first referendum. It was a magnificent achievement and Nettie’s one word response (‘Incredible!’) spoke volumes about how unexpected even the campaigners found it.
When the poll closed, the activists enjoyed what Nettie called a ‘wild night’ in town, before Guido organised a more formal New Year’s Eve party in honour of their victory. The post-referendum revelry continued through the holiday period, until in the midst of the merriment, Guido made a remarkable decision.

Scheduled to visit the Palmers, he sent instead a letter. ‘I shan’t be at Emerald till near evening,’ he wrote. ‘I am taking a rash and extreme step about 2 p.m. tomorrow and will walk over to you from Upwey after lunch.’

Nettie somehow knew at once what he meant. ‘Passed a horrid afternoon,’ she wrote, ‘wondering precisely who was his wife.’ Guido arrived that evening and the Palmers discovered he’d just married Kathleen Tobin, of whom they knew absolutely nothing. She was, they eventually learned, an apolitical pantomime actress: presumably Guido, in the fashion of his student days, approached her at the stage door at the King’s Theatre during his holiday spreeing.

Es Keogh flatly described his sister’s rival as a ‘pretty nit-wit’. Nettie’s assessment of Toby was more generous. ‘Obviously, she’s pretty,’ she told her diary, ‘with black eyes and shapely lips and ears and neck. But she’s far more than that. A little self-conscious and actressy and childishly decided on things she doesn’t understand. Delightful though and to be reckoned with.’

What lay behind this extraordinary decision, the abandonment of Lesbia for an overnight marriage to a woman he scarcely knew and with whom he had so little in common? Betty Roland later said that, when she asked Guido why he married Toby, he replied: ‘Because she refused to go to bed with me unless I did.’ However, this should be set against Guido’s anger when Bob Ross, the editor of the *Socialist*, reacted to his marriage by suggesting it ‘solved the sex problem’. The remark outraged Guido, not just for its crassness but for what it revealed about Ross’ regard for women. ‘Certainly in the Ross family,’ Guido said, ‘I never saw any signs of Mrs Ross taking any kind of prominent part or even being allowed to.’

By contrast, Guido surrounded himself with strong, talented women. When he loved, he embraced his partner in toto, with an overwhelming passion sweeping other considerations and other commitments aside. He lived each romance as the love of a lifetime—and each time he became smitten, it was like the first time. As Betty Roland wrote, when a new infatuation struck Guido, ‘everything that’s happened is forgotten and he’s oblivious of anything but his irresistible desire to be with the new beloved favourite. And it must be all or nothing …’

So it was with Toby. He wanted to be with her; she wanted to marry. As a revolutionary, he cared little for the sanction of a legal certificate. If it mattered to her, and it didn’t matter to him, why not? Of course, a moment’s thought would have revealed any number of reasons, all of which became painfully clear in the weeks to come. But the marriage went ahead.
As for Lesbia, Guido stopped loving her the instant Toby became the woman with whom he wanted to spend his life. He’d never made a commitment to Lesbia and he seemed not to recognise how important he’d become to her: one of her subsequent letters spoke of his assumption that she did not love him. His wedding, officiated according to the semi-secular rites of Sinclaire’s Free Religious Fellowship, proceeded with Lesbia sick in bed, so unaware of Guido’s plans as to be still composing love poems about him.

The next morning, the Palmers received telegraphs for and about Guido, messages that sent him rushing back to town. One of them quite probably came from Lesbia. A few weeks later she wrote cryptically of her love coming too late—did she wire him with a declaration of her feelings that brought him back to town?

Certainly, the poem she wrote that day renders Guido’s strange marriage in an even stranger light:

If I were never to see your face
Never to feel your kisses again
I couldn’t bear it. I shouldn’t live,
I shouldn’t live to bear such pain.

She mustn’t bear it. Often I think
O my dear lover, love her again.
She is so darling, how can we bear
How can we dare to cause her pain!

The verb ‘were’ in the first verse implies that Guido’s kisses continued, despite his marriage, while the second stanza casts Toby—Guido’s wife of two days—as the woman more likely to be forsaken. The poem suggests that, confronted by the devastation he’d wrought, Guido made love to Lesbia, and consoled her with the impossible assurance that their own relationship would continue.

No wonder Pietro struggled to understand why Toby had fled. Guido had said nothing to his wife about Lesbia, for Toby belonged to neither political nor bohemian circles; she sought a conventional husband, not a free spirit, and pressed him to take a house in Albert Street, East Melbourne—a more suitable address in which to begin respectable family life.

Naturally, her expectations of happy domesticity clashed immediately with Guido’s political commitments, which were entirely foreign to her. On the day of their marriage, Nettie had found Guido ‘bursting with Anti-Conscription Army plans and IWW criticism’ and, Toby or no Toby, he continued to spend his Sundays agitating with the ACA on the Yarra Bank.
Lesbia, on the other hand, enthusiastically dubbed the ACA ‘industrial bushrangers’, and her continuing zeal for the group made her relationship with Guido ever more painful. Even if he thought that, philosophically, a marriage certificate made no difference (a view that, in any case, his wife never shared), the world now saw him as a wedded man, which forced Lesbia into the position of a surreptitious mistress. Her emotions seesawed wildly.

‘This small body is like an empty snail shell,’ she wrote, ‘All the living soul of it/Burnt out in lime.’

His arrest that February, less than a month after his marriage, brought all the contradictions to the surface.

The sentence Guido received was initially non-custodial: a fine of fifty pounds on each charge plus a 200 pound good behaviour bond and a stern lecture from the magistrate. ‘If I did not believe that you are sadly deficient in mentality,’ he explained from the bench, ‘it would be my duty to send you to gaol. What you said appears to me to be a lot of silly nonsense, full of vanity, and an overweening craving for notoriety.’

The problem for Guido lay in the implications of the bond. Signing it entailed an acknowledgement of wrongdoing and prevented any further campaigning. Adela Pankhurst, the daughter of the famous suffragette family and a prominent ant-war campaigner, had recently chosen prison over a bond. Should Guido make the same sacrifice?

Toby clearly didn’t think so. Only a few weeks ago, she’d married a wealthy and urbane gentleman, not a gaolbird or a political martyr. Haranguing the Yarra Bank was bad enough; a spell in Pentridge was quite something else—and the idea that you would voluntarily go into prison seemed perfectly insane.

Lesbia, on the other hand, assured Guido he had a duty to choose gaol, that anything less entailed a betrayal of principle. ‘She took great pains to see that I should go to gaol,’ Guido remembered. ‘She was dead keen on my going to gaol. She was quite right … She was a great help to me.’

Once Guido had made his choice, Lesbia resolved to travel to Sydney: partly because the attempts to re-form the IWW were stronger there but also, clearly, to get away from the intolerable Melbourne situation. She wrote to Guido, just before she left, in stammering prose that contrasted markedly with the spare confidence of her poetry. ‘You will think I don’t love you very much if I can do without you for so long,’ she said, ‘But I do love you, I do love you. And I want you like Hell.’

Of course, Guido’s imprisonment very quickly brought his wife into regular contact with his political friends, people who had known him, only a few months earlier, as Lesbia’s partner. Toby seems to have learned enough to suspect her husband’s infidelity—and so she, too, took flight to Sydney where, according to Betty Roland, she ran at once into the arms of a former boyfriend.
This was the muddle that Pietro had stumbled upon and which Nettie Palmer, quite understandably, chose not to explain. It was the mess into which, very soon, Guido would be released.
Throughout the first half of 1918, Australian generals pleaded for more and ever more men, with the German army still pushing forward until July. The defeat of the second referendum destroyed any hopes of coercing recruits, leaving the government scrambling to mend relations with the workers it wanted to enlist. The more conservative labour leaders, most of whom had always backed the war, were only too happy for a reconciliation, but they recognised the temper of an increasingly militant rank and file, and knew they needed to deliver some concessions.

On 10 April, a delegation of various radical groups met to discuss Guido’s imprisonment with the Solicitor-General Sir Robert Garran, and EHA Smith from Trades Hall bluntly explained his situation. ‘I believe that if Baracchi were released,’ he said, ‘it would help [Trades Hall] Executive and help the Government to get over a difficult position.’

He was, in other words, offering a deal: if you want our help with recruitment, you’ll need to free political prisoners like Guido.

The federal Labor leader, Frank Tudor, took the same position. In return for a personal commitment to the enlistment drive, the government guaranteed him the remittance of outstanding penalties under the War Precautions Act. The acting Attorney-General advised on 9 May that the agreement applied to the Baracchi case, and Guido was unexpectedly set free on that day—a few weeks short of the expiration of his sentence.

The official assessment of his character remained unchanged. Guido had wanted to break irrevocably with capitalism; for most respectable Australians, he’d done precisely that, and even Guido’s childhood playmate Nibby—now Lieutenant Eric Quirk of the 6th Infantry—cut, for a time, all contact with his infamous cousin. Crown Solicitor Castles had, after all, assessed Guido as either insane or dangerous and, if the new political climate required Baracchi’s release in order to soft-soap the unions, the necessity further confirmed his status: Guido was sufficiently important a radical that the labour movement cared about his fate.

The poetry with which the Victorian Socialist Party celebrated Guido’s release showed that the socialists recognised him as one of them, a committed activist returning to the struggle. Guido, too, seems to have seen himself this way. The discomforts of gaol hadn’t dampened his commitment: outside the prison gate, he told the VSP paper that he recognised
the use the government sought to make of him and explicitly disavowed any cooperation with the war effort.

Only Pietro hinted at Guido’s other problems.

‘He telephoned me from the “Blue Birds” on that evening at about 10 p.m.,’ said Pietro to his notebook, recording Guido’s release. ‘I was greatly but pleasantly surprised—You bet—My word! Corpo di Bacco!’

Before he put his diary away, he made a final cryptic reference to his son’s matrimonial situation.

‘Thus ends an episode in the boy’s life,’ Pietro wrote, ‘the sad part of which, for me has nothing to do with political creeds or social questions, and … but I had better say no more about it. I may be wrong and I hope I am. We shall see!!’

It seemed at first his suspicions might indeed be unfounded. Guido caught the express train to Sydney, determined to mend relations with Toby. Over the next weeks, he turned on the full force of his charm, seeing off the ex-boyfriend and persuading her to give their marriage another try.

He made no attempt to contact Lesbia, who responded with another heartbroken poem:

I dreamt last night of happy home-comings.
Friends I had loved and had believed were dead
Came happily to visit me and said
I was a part of their fair home-coming.

It’s strange that I should dream of welcomings
And happy meetings, when my love, last week
Returned from exile, did not even speak
Or write to me or need my welcoming.

She’d earlier written to him from Surry Hills, where she lodged with Ann Larkin, the wife of gaoled IWW leader Peter Larkin. ‘I can’t say I am either happy or unhappy,’ she’d told Guido, ‘because I, as I, have simply ceased to exist. I am merely a point of consciousness, a thing without past or future, not a real entity at all.’

The sole spark in Lesbia’s letters came from her joy at re-encountering ‘that old love of mine’, a coded reference to the IWW. She threw herself into a group called the Industrial Labor Party, another (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to relaunch the Wobblies.

Guido did, eventually, seek Lesbia out—but only after he’d effected a reconciliation with his wife. Remarkably, he and Lesbia almost immediately re-established their former intimacy. She introduced him to the Sydney political scene and they caught the ferry to Manly, with Lesbia singing more of her poems along the way. She showed him the Parramatta River and,
when he admired its natural splendour, she ‘suddenly and vividly brought home … the strange beauty she had discovered in two engineering constructions nearby’.

Whether they were again lovers is not clear—but Lesbia’s feelings certainly remained unchanged, right up until Guido left. Only his return to Melbourne—and his new determination to make his marriage work—convinced her that their relationship was at an end.

For the first time, her poems became defiant rather than anguished:

He looks in my heart and the image there
Is himself, himself, than himself more fair.

And he thinks of my heart as a mirror clear
To reflect the image I hold most dear.

But my heart is much more like a stream, I think,
Where my lover may come when he needs to drink.

And my heart is a stream that seems asleep
But the tranquil waters run strong and deep;

They reflect the image that seems most fair
But their meaning and purpose are otherwhere.

He may come, my lover, and lie on the brink
And gaze at his image and smile and drink

While the hidden waters run strong and free,
Unheeded, unguessed at, the soul of me.

Lesbia stayed in Sydney; she and Guido lost contact. As the Industrial Labor Party foundered, her political activities centred almost exclusively on the Wobbly prisoners she visited. In 1920, she married Pat Harford, a stained-glass maker by trade and a Wobbly by conviction. Harford dabbled in painting and when they moved back to Melbourne, he played a small part in establishing a modernist tradition in Australian visual art, though Es Keogh claimed Harford simply repeated ideas he’d learned from Lesbia.

The marriage broke down under the strain of Pat’s alcoholism. Lesbia continued to write poetry and completed the novel *The Invaluable Mystery* in the early twenties, an account of a persecuted German family in Sydney during the war, perhaps inspired by the von Dechend case. Like most of her writing, it remained unpublished in her lifetime. She returned to law and completed her articles, but the strain proved too much for her heart, inevitably weakening as she grew older. She contracted pneumonia and died in St Vincent’s hospital on 5 July 1927, aged just thirty-six.
Even in her later years, her thoughts occasionally strayed to her affair with Guido—‘my year of pain’, as she called it in a poem from July 1918. In that verse, she dubbed Guido ‘sweet and fair, and weak, and most untrue!’, an assessment that captured her contradictory feelings towards him. He had treated her with cruel carelessness, yet like most of his lovers, she remembered him fondly. When they accidentally met in the early twenties, she wrote ‘Lovers Parted’, singing her continued affection:

The past is gone. We must believe
It has no power to change our lives.
Yet still our constant hearts rejoice
Because the past survives.

In her final illness, Lesbia tried once more to contact Guido, but the message didn’t reach him until too late. Recalling her death many years later, he wrote, with genuine sorrow, ‘I shall not look upon her like again.’

Guido spent his first weeks back in Melbourne enjoying a belated honeymoon in a little cottage in Black Rock, trying to rebuild his relationship with Toby in the idyllic seaside conditions. ‘We have from the front door,’ he wrote to Nettie, ‘landscape and seascape and sunsets to gladden us and cooking and washing up and scrubbing and chopping wood and feeding fowls to sober us up. We have great log fires and a cat. We are happy.’

In the simple cottage, the external universe could shrink to sunsets and beach walks, a space in which congeniality and physical attraction might seem enough to make a marriage work. Toby became pregnant during the honeymoon; perhaps she and Guido saw a child as cementing together their damaged union.

Yet, from his first weekend back in Melbourne, Guido was giving public lectures, thanking his supporters and calling for renewed efforts on behalf of the imprisoned IWW men, and even during their honeymoon, he returned to the city to give his economics class at the Labor College. The distance between his fascination with such matters and Toby’s perfect indifference to them was a rift that nothing—especially not a baby—could ever close.

Guido’s comrades in the old Anti-Conscription Army had renamed themselves the One Big Union Propaganda League, capitalising on broad enthusiasm for the Wobbly dream of a single industrial organisation uniting all workers. The league gathered regularly in a room above the Palace Theatre at the top end of Bourke Street. Its meetings attracted clever, earnest workingmen like Bill Casey—an old sailor who contributed both smart parodies of well-known songs and dense screeds about German materialism—and the Polish brothers Frank and Max Stevens (or Stephanski), who were industriously teaching themselves social theory. Guido again stood each Sunday on the Yarra Bank, where Sid Gower, an old wharfie, welcomed the crowd with a sad shake of his head. ‘You dirty slaves …’ he greeted them.
Noting Guido’s role as the league’s delegate to a joint demonstration against Allied intervention in Russia, the censor scrawled, ‘He is developing in the expected direction.’

Certainly, he’d become an established fixture on the political scene. Yet talk of an expected development obscured the reality that, by 1918, the authorities and the rebels alike felt much less certain as to what the new radical direction might be.

The guns of Europe had fallen silent in November, not because statesmen negotiated an end to the violence, but because revolution erupted into the streets of Berlin. The downfall of the Kaiser at the hands of insurgent workers suggested that the experience of the Soviet Union might have a more general applicability. Yet events in Russia remained far from clear, with the Australian newspapers awash with the most hallucinogenic reports of Soviet construction. ‘Commissaries of free love have been established in several towns,’ explained the Argus, with po-faced solemnity. ‘Respectable women have been flogged for refusing to yield. Experiments are being made in the nationalisation of children.’

From what Guido could garner, Russia seemed to vindicate the Wobblies’ basic principles: direct action over parliament, militancy rather than arbitration, class solidarity instead of nationalism. The re-creation of the IWW seemed, therefore, the necessary first step towards a Soviet-style revolution in Australia. He and Laidler renamed their group the International Industrial Workers, and, under that more provocative title, set about forging links with militants in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and Broken Hill.

It was a dangerous business. The relaxation of the War Precautions Act hadn’t lessened official hostility to the Wobblies, and the purported distinction between the legal IIW and the outlawed IWW fooled no one. The security forces regularly discussed amongst themselves the potential for prosecuting these ersatz Wobblies, while the newspapers drew readers’ attention to the connections between the disloyalists old and new. ‘OBUism means IWW-ism,’ said the Argus editorialist. ‘IWW-ism means Bolshevikism and Bolshevikism means the tearing of young girls from their homes and mating them like animals to men selected for them by a government bureau!’

The wild, almost deranged, rhetoric heralded a fresh round of repression. On the Yarra Bank, the supporters of the VSP (though considerably more moderate than Guido’s group) faced off against police every Sunday over the right to display red flags, now officially banned. On 18 March 1919, Guido’s friend RH Long received six months gaol under the War Precautions Act, merely for flourishing the ensign of socialism. In Brisbane a few days later, returned soldiers attacked a flag-carrying procession of Russians and their Left-wing allies. Seven thousand diggers, some with guns, some with bombs, gathered outside the Russian Association hall, chanting ‘Burn them out! … Hang them!’ As the Russians fled, the mob
turned on Guido’s comrades in the Brisbane OBU Propaganda League, throwing its platform into the river and assaulting its members with sticks, knives and boots.

In Melbourne, the *Argus* identified the Labor College as a propaganda school ‘like that of the Moscow Bolsheviks’. The paper specifically named Guido (‘found guilty of attempting to prejudice recruiting during the war’) as a local disloyalist whose activities should be carefully monitored: an identification that, given the louts habitually bashing speakers on the Bank, was a deliberate intimidation.

On 7 March, in this atmosphere of brooding menace, Toby gave birth to Guido’s daughter, Lelia Katrina Baracchi.

The socialist movement had forged its own rituals for parenting so that, instead of baptising a bundle of joy in Christ’s name, parents could ‘dedicate’ the infant under the Red Flag. The Baracchis, however, eschewed such innovations. In the newspapers, Guido featured as a notorious syndicalist revolutionary and convicted criminal, but in his new house in Darling Street, South Yarra, he lived very much as a respectable gentleman—as indeed he described his occupation on his daughter’s birth certificate. In his strange, divided life, Guido surely felt the pull of domesticity now more than ever before.

Yet it was just at this time that the values represented by Darling Street came under sustained challenge all around the world. A Soviet government briefly won power in Hungary, mass strikes gripped Britain, workers’ councils controlled factories all over Italy. Reports of riots, street fighting and industrial upheavals across the breadth of Europe filled the papers.

‘Our world,’ the British Prime Minister Lloyd George warned, ‘is in a state of convulsion and only a bold man would predict what is going to happen. Russia has gone to pieces, and Germany is going to pieces. Nobody knows what the end may be.’

In Darling Street, a single child squalled and squealed, but at Andrade’s, millions of babies waited: not just the infants of Australia but all the children in the homes of all the workers in the world, both those born and those yet undreamt of, a vast horde who would, if the revolution spread, escape deprivation, hunger and neglect. These pleasantly abstract infants never cried, nor required changing; instead, they silently urged Guido to read the latest appeal for the IWW Twelve, or to study the new edition of the *International Socialist*, or to attend a meeting of the Y Club to discuss Soviet Russia with the intellectuals from the VSP.

Guido admired women who were comfortable in the public sphere, like so many of his female friends, and perhaps his marriage might have lasted longer had Toby pursued a career. Lelia, however, simply didn’t enter into his calculations, and his neglect let the burden of her care fall solely on Toby. As Lelia later remembered, Guido was ‘not interested in children and not involved as a father’.
When he brought his politics home, he only made matters worse. That year, Guido befriended the Manchester radical Moses Baritz, an old-style travelling agitator from the Socialist Party of Great Britain, blowing into Melbourne like an oratorical tornado. Baritz specialised in rhetorical combat: he dropped his considerable bulk into the front seat of a lecture theatre to loudly mutter, ‘Tripe! Rotten tripe! Bloody awful stinking tripe!’, until the speaker agreed to debate him.

Baritz opposed the IIW and eventually forced an inconclusive debate on its failings with Laidler, but he genuinely delighted in ideas (he played the violin, loved ballet and could talk for hours about opera) and at once identified Percy and Guido as the best source of intellectual stimulation in the city. As a tribute to his new friends, Baritz proposed a gigantic feast and spent the afternoon in the Baracchi household frying, baking and broiling, even though the notion of a man cooking for pleasure engendered further astonishment amongst radicals already transfixed by Moses’ peculiarities. The dinner, which fed eighteen Leftists, became legendary within socialist circles, not least because, in a culture dominated by stodgy English food, Baritz’s Jewish cuisine seemed impossibly exotic.

From Toby’s perspective, of course, this socialistic bonhomie was all very well, but Moses’ cookery left the walls and ceiling of the Darling Street kitchen spattered with grease and oil and, while Baritz was an expert raconteur, able to quote Capital and the Bible at will, his wit did not seem quite so splendid to a woman exhausted with a new baby, especially when she cared little for politics and nothing at all for Karl Marx.

Moses’ disruptive influence came to an end when, during a public lecture on ‘Love Throughout the Ages’ (the means by which he funded his travels), his account of Heloise’s romance with Abelard culminated in such an enthusiastic description of Abelard’s castration that the shocked young men in the audience ushered their girlfriends from the theatre in droves. Still, even as Baritz fled to Sydney, Guido remained as intensely occupied with activism as ever. He and Laidler worked on a new magazine, Industrial Solidarity, intended to provide intellectual guidance for the scattered Wobbly grouplets. Guido’s editorial talent and Laidler’s experience produced a publication that blended the traditional IWW humour with higher production values and a greater theoretical seriousness. The first edition came off the presses in June 1919, with Guido’s editorial affirming the paper’s solidarity both with the IWW and the Bolsheviks, amounting to little short of a declaration of war. ‘When the capitalist class,’ he wrote, ‘acting through its agent the State, annihilated the IWW of Australia, it did not also annihilate the men who had been members of that body … With infinite regret, with a thousand apologies, we are forced to admit to the masters that we do still exist … The IWW is dead; long live the IIW.’
The reaction was entirely predictable and, in its way, gratifying. When a Herald journalist saw Industrial Solidarity sold in New South Wales, his paper thundered: ‘The Bolshevik is abroad in Sydney. He has distributed his official organ in the Domain.’ The censor, of necessity something of a connoisseur of radical publications, noted that ‘Melbourne [has become] the centre of the re-awakening IWW movement—thanks to the aid of Industrial Solidarity, which is hailed on all sides … as “the best working-class paper in Australia today”’.

The paper appeared just as Tom Walsh, the new leader of the seamen’s union, launched a campaign for the wage increases his members had been denied during the war. When the case went to arbitration, Justice Higgins—Nettie’s uncle—awarded far less than the men’s claim. A conference on shipboard wages and conditions produced no satisfactory result, and the union launched a nationwide strike.

The outbreak of ‘Walshevism’ provided a natural focus for IWW propaganda: an irresistible example of direct action, and a cautionary tale about the perils of arbitration. Walsh contributed to Industrial Solidarity under the pseudonym ‘Sinbad the Sailor’ and Guido turned much of his editorial fire upon Higgins, especially when Walsh went to gaol for breaching the Arbitration Act.

Guido’s deliberately rude open letter to the judge caused especial heartbreak for Nettie who tried, impossibly, to negotiate between her uncle and her friend. She saw the force of Guido’s dismissal of the supposed neutrality of arbitration, but she remained temperamentally sympathetic to Higgins’ liberal creed and its claim to ‘see both sides’. ‘I could talk about it all for hours,’ she wept to Hig, ‘though it’s all so horribly sad that it’s almost unbearable.’

Nettie’s anguish came as the tide of political events in mid-1919 either swirled Guido’s friends deeper into radicalism or else forced them to retreat to shallower waters. Frederick Macartney’s passing interest in socialism waned as he moved to apolitical Darwin, while Vance Palmer, in Europe until the end of the year, explained to Nettie that, if he were Russian, he would be an anti-Bolshevik.

‘This world is trembling and cracking in all directions,’ Nettie wrote in reply. ‘Matey, sweetheart, I’m afraid.’

Others of Guido’s circle saw the times as he did: dangerous, yes, but shimmering with potential. Katharine Prichard moved to Western Australia but continued the Marxist studies she’d begun in his Labor College class. Earsman and Christian Jollie Smith, now in a surreptitious relationship, travelled to Sydney to spread the Labor College gospel. In Oxford, Hig fell under the spell of the talented Marxist Andrew Rothstein, and embraced, with the fervour of a late convert, the idea of the class struggle.
Perhaps most unexpectedly, Lesbia’s brother Esmond Keogh returned from Gallipoli, carrying reproductions of post-impressionist art in his kitbag and an abiding hatred of capitalist war in his heart.

‘He has taken a header into the industrial movement, brains and brawn and all, since he came back,’ Nettie told her brother. ‘He seems to have lived in it for years.’

Es bore Guido no illwill over the abandonment of his beloved sister and became, for a time, an ardent Wobbly. ‘The revolution is coming in different countries,’ he explained, ‘crudely but undeniably coming.’ He joined Guido on the Yarra Bank, where their version of an old hymn analysed class relations within the Kingdom of Heaven.

‘You’ll mix his nectar cool,’ they chorused, ‘And hold him on his cloud.’

And signal to the choir
When they do sing too loud
And shine his crown of gold,
And fold his spreading wings,
And mend his twanging harp
When rapture breaks the strings;
And smoodge and crawl and squirm
As this side of the grave
For he is Master dear
And you are but a slave!

Throughout 1919, Guido grew into an activist of national significance, not merely in Wobbly circles but within the labour movement more generally. The IIW remained a small organisation—when they raided the Sydney branch, the police counted a mere seventy-six members—but its reputation circulated nationwide. In Townsville, police recorded an open air meeting under the ‘Tree of Knowledge’, with a speaker declaring that his ‘organisation had adopted the preamble and constitution of the IIW Melbourne because of it being the most democratic and militant of its kind in Australia’. Later in the year, the Adelaide branch of the Australian Socialist Party defected to the IIW, while in Brisbane, the Russian radicals, the most important source of information about Bolshevism, explicitly associated themselves with Guido’s group.

Yet this renaissance of Wobblyism proved short lived, with the IIW stalling and then fragmenting after Roley Farrall, its rough-and-ready office manager, was arrested for passing fake five-pound notes. For Roley, defrauding the boss was simply part of the class war, a manifestation of the industrial sabotage that the Wobblies had always advocated. Es Keogh, on the other hand, was outraged, both because Farrall had implicated him in criminal
foolishness, but more because his antics rendered the IIW—which Es had joined out of revulsion at capitalist turpitude—no better than any other swindler. Es dropped the Wobblies, lost interest in politics altogether and, after a flirtation with the visual arts, became a highly regarded epidemiologist.

Though Guido agreed on the idiocy of counterfeiting, the Farrall incident provoked no moral crisis for him because he recognised it as symptomatic of a deeper political problem. Sabotage might have been part of the IWW tradition but, as more became known of the Russian revolution, the IWW tradition seemed, all of a sudden, distinctly antiquated.

In November 1919, Guido spoke at a meeting at the Guild Hall in Swanston Street, where he conveyed the enthusiasm of the International Industrial Workers for the ‘glorious revolution in Russia’. He shared the stage with representatives of the Women’s Peace Army, the Victorian Socialist Party, the Australian Socialist Party and the Workers International Industrial Union. Even Alf Wallis from the Victorian Trades Hall Council enthused about Sovietism. ‘The Trades Hall endorsed that form of government,’ he explained, ‘and when the time came for the revolution in Australia, the Trades Hall would expect to see the Soviet system of Government established in Australia.’

This breadth of support represented less a wholesale conversion to Bolshevism than a general confusion as to what it entailed. As local radicals became aware of the profound originality of Russian Marxism, the existing Left groups all slide into crisis.

It was a time of argument and dispute, of reappraisal and reassessment, debates that stretched into the evenings and began again the next day. A year or so earlier, Andrade’s catalogue, the most extensive listing of radical books in the country, had contained almost nothing on Russian socialism. Now Laidler—with Guido’s assistance—frantically published cheap pamphlets of more-or-less accurate travellers’ tales from the few Westerners to visit Soviet Russia. Red Russia, Inside Soviet Russia, A Plea for Russia, In Russia: the restless men who came to the shop each Friday snapped them up as they came off the presses.

In the past, socialists debating strategy and tactics had drawn heavily on historical parallels, economic theorems and philosophical treatises, the late night reading of many a working-class autodidact. Inevitably, their disputes conjured up towers of abstraction, which eventually soared so dizzily above practical experience that no extract from Dietzgen or Labriola could provide an entirely satisfactory foundation. But the miasma of theory had, at last, condensed into something tangible. Socialism was fact, not dream, in the land of the Soviets, a materialisation that changed everything. That was why they yearned for news, why every nugget of information from Russia, whether gleaned from a book or a pamphlet or a conversation, had to be weighed and graded and polished before it could be placed gingerly alongside the few other precious facts in their collection.
They were all, in Jack London’s phrase, ‘drunken with comprehension’, intoxicated with a fresh intellectual paradigm that threw old certainties into doubt and opened up possibilities where previously there were none. They savoured the first, badly printed copies of Lenin’s *State and Revolution* when they appeared in 1920, doing their best to absorb its integration of Marx’s ideas with the living movement in Russia. Ernie Houston, a master tailor who wrote on economics for the *Socialist* under the unfortunate pen-name ‘Dogmatist’, marched into Andrade’s, flourished a copy of *State and Revolution* at the staff and declared it ‘the most revolutionary book ever written’—a sentiment with which Guido fully agreed.

When Toby looked back at this period, she spoke of Guido as ‘living on his means, with the exception of doing occasional journalistic work’, a description that, while true in a literal sense, hinted at just how far apart she and Guido had grown. To the young mother, more concerned about her child than Zinoviev’s thoughts on industrial unionism or Morgan Philips Price’s impressions of Soviet democracy, Guido seemed to perform no useful function whatsoever: neither helping her with Lelia nor pursuing a recognisable career, but pottering around with Laidler during the day and wasting his evenings in debates with ne’er-do-wells in the back rooms of hotels.

In Guido’s own terms, he was busier than Toby could have imagined. Russia sent him back to Marx, forcing him to understand old passages in new and heady ways. If the revolution didn’t entirely confirm what he’d written for *Industrial Solidarity*, neither did it simply contradict his Wobblyism. Instead, Russia provided a new and different political model, one that rendered the IWW’s partial insights more profound and resolved its internal contradictions in a doctrine at once strangely familiar and profoundly foreign. The deeply theoretical Bolsheviks, steeped in Hegel and Marx and the European socialist tradition, provided the intellectual charge he’d first received from Wells and Shaw, yet on a higher and more systematic level. Their ideas formed a unity, a totality as comprehensive as the schemas of the guild socialists, but embracing, like the IWW, the dark masses of the population, for whom no other party spoke.

What’s more, the evidence emerging from Russia—as fragmentary, obscure and contradictory as it often was—suggested that the new concepts actually worked. The regime was precarious; hunger and counter-revolution threatened, but the majority of industrial workers supported the Bolsheviks, and the accounts from journalists like John Reed and Arthur Ransome told of labourers in tattered overalls and soldiers still in uniform debating out their future in the endless meetings of the factory councils.

Guido’s appreciation of the challenge of Leninism led him, as the IWW died a natural death, to stress once more the importance of political education. ‘In Australia at the present time, the situation is distinctly non-revolutionary,’ he was arguing as late as mid-1920. ‘This
is the very time that calls for working-class education, for study … In this way it may even now be possible to begin the building up of a powerful revolutionary movement in Australia. The pre-requisite of this is a persistent and conscientious study of Marxism.’

As the shockwaves from the Soviet Union continued to reverberate, others drew more specifically organisational conclusions. In the Victorian Socialist Party, still the most important Melbourne radical group, a schism opened between the traditionalist leadership and a group of younger, more impatient members, their eyes fixed firmly on Russia.

Bob Ross, the editor of the *Socialist*, led the VSP majority. A frail, bespectacled man, usually with a flower in his buttonhole, Ross supported the revolution, yes—but only in Russia. Australia, he said, needed to find its own path to socialism, a road less likely to involve factory councils and barricades than the traditional remedies prescribed by local agitators: the election of the ALP, the formation of the One Big Union and the exclusion of the Chinese.

By late 1919, the younger VSP members rolled their eyes at the sentimental oratory of a man they sarcastically dubbed ‘Fighting Bob’. Ross’ talk of a specifically Australian socialism was, they said, ‘flapdoodle’. The Labor Party represented not an outgrowth of the struggle but a ‘cancerous growth on the working-class movement’. Against it and against Ross, they hailed ‘Proletarian Russia rising supremely and gloriously as a phoenix from the ashes of Capitalism’.

The polarisation was political but it also represented a generational division, pitting the young and the brash against their more sedate elders. Studying at Oxford, Hig wrote to Nettie with disgust at the socialists who condemned the Russian experiment with an energy they’d somehow never marshalled against the capitalists.

‘It seems vile,’ he said, ‘to oppose revolutionaries that may be blind and restless and destructive but who at least are sincere … [By sincerity I mean] sincerity in the matter of political and social revolution, something that makes a man say, “Damn you and all your blasted half-heartedness. A lot of scheming knaves have turned the rest of you foolish. Think of what you could have if you only tried. And let us try now.”’

In response, Nettie remarked on ‘the run on Marx just now in several quarters’ (she had in mind not only Guido but Katharine Prichard and Christian Jollie Smith), a trend that she could not bring herself to approve. Her cautions were not simply those of an older sister to an impressionable brother, but also expressed a definite political tendency taking shape in opposition to Guido and his friends.

‘I wonder if you’ll go Bolshevik, old cove,’ she wrote. ‘I’ll forgive you if you do, because I know you won’t easily become ridden by the altogether mechanical internationalism of it.’
This characteristic disdain for internationalism stemmed not only from Nettie’s lifelong dedication to a specifically Australian culture but also from the attachment she, with Ross and many of the older radicals, felt for White Australia, one of the traditional labour planks most threatened by Russian Marxism. Racial populism could co-exist alongside Nettie’s pacifism and genuine commitment to worldwide fraternity because, for her, socialism consisted of an amalgam of individual nostrums rather than an integrated system.

She urged a similar eclecticism upon Hig:

[I am] glad that [Marx] has caught you young at the period where it’s natural to want something diagrammatic and complete as an explanation of phenomena. Vance was deep in Marx just about your age, and he says it’s almost necessary … Vance was saying that Marx’s letters on foreign affairs are very impressive … They are based on the Materialist Conception, of course … But sometimes you feel that the skeleton key is a little too obvious.

Even if Hig had shared Nettie’s appreciation of Vance’s hand-me-down opinions, her critique of materialism would scarcely have quashed his enthusiasm, since it stemmed less from philosophical ruminations about Marx’s method than from an all-consuming distaste for the old world. On one hand, Hig saw those struggling with new methods to make a new society; on the other, he identified only the brutal men of the capitalist system, drenched to the elbow with the gore of the Great War.

Communism generated a palpable excitement, and it infected the most unlikely people. In the street, Guido ran into Clem Lazarus, an old friend from the Shop.

‘We had a long evening,’ Clem wrote to Hig, ‘and I had my eyes opened to what seems to be a whole fresh universe of discourse. I knew vaguely what Capital said and I had heard more vaguely of people like Labriola and de Leon but I didn’t realise that Marxical thought is more alive today than any more orthodox philosophical or sociological movement … Baracchi has posted me an admirable bibliography, with references to all the books he names and an account of what they are.’

When the VSP’s young guard established a stronghold in the party’s Collingwood branch, Guido agreed to lecture for them, a decision that inevitably drew him directly into the struggle against Ross. His regular talks began as innocuous expositions of Marxist economics but they soon evolved into the far more controversial ‘Precepts of Communism’: precepts that stood in implicit rebuke of the VSP’s own platform.

He eventually joined in a team debate against Ross and two leadership supporters. Both sides were still fumbling their arguments but the themes that emerged were already familiar. Could socialism come via Labor parties, as Ross believed, or did radicals need a completely different sort of organisation, as Guido maintained? Could socialists belong to a party as loose
and eclectic as the VSP or did they need Bolshevik discipline and an unambiguously Marxist program? Was Leninism a model for the future or simply a peculiar quirk of history, important to Russia but nowhere else?

Of course, the debate in itself settled nothing, for the real struggle in 1920 took place over the small number of waverers not already committed to either camp. It was a long, slow campaign that brought Guido to Sydney where, advertised as ‘Melbourne’s foremost Marxist’, he explained to the sympathisers there that the bankruptcy of Labor was ‘patent to the very bonehead’.

At home, he dedicated himself to replacing the lapsed Industrial Solidarity with a new magazine: more serious, more theoretical, more self-consciously Marxist. Each issue of the Proletarian Review filled in some of the blank expanses on the new charts of communism, with concise explanations of how Bolshevism both differed from and related to the doctrines that the Australian militants already knew.

The value of Guido’s efforts varied according to one’s attitude to the Dark Continent of Soviet Marxism. Nettie, for instance, objected to the new and discordant idiom polluting the Left, the strange lexicon Guido promoted in each edition of the Proletarian Review.

‘I’m glad you feel happy with Marx,’ she wrote to Hig, ‘and I’ll continue to be glad, provided you manage to refrain from using words like ideology, above all ideology itself. I’m not joking really … The most awful tongue-twisting phrases are used, with the word ideology imbedded in them somewhere to give them cachet.’

Nettie’s complaint revealed again the struggle between the old era dying and a new one struggling to be born. Lesbia had understood, in her poetic joust with Frederick Macartney, that the new age could not be patronised or condemned but must be grasped on its own terms.

On the other side of the world, TS Eliot wrote of a time of war and revolution where:

words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

Bolshevism provided one of the ascendant tongues of violent modernity, and the Proletarian Review’s attempt at a dictionary was widely hailed by the differing Marxist factions in Australia.

Yet the Review still left the question of organisation entirely open, and here Guido’s old ally, the more practical Earsman, came to the fore. In Sydney with Christian Jollie Smith, he was busy assembling a Bolshevik party—or, at least, an entity shaped by what Earsman took
such a party to be. He’d formed an alliance with Jock Garden, a union leader whose larrikin charm masked a complete absence of political principle, and in September 1920, Guido and Laidler received a draft manifesto from the Earsman-Garden group. On Earsman’s urging, they and the other former IIW members gathered around the Proletarian Review inaugurated their own small and secret Melbourne communist branch.

They timed their first intervention as organised communists to coincide with a fresh offensive by the rebels inside the VSP. To impress the Young Turks of the Socialist Party, Guido produced a no-holds-barred assault on Ross: a flyer that accused ‘so-called socialists who covertly attack the Russian revolution’ of ‘scabbing on the workers of Russia and the world’, and suggesting that the conservative VSP leaders should be treated like any other strike-breakers.

He possessed, of course, no experience of actually dealing with scabs, and may not have understood that, insofar as his rhetoric meant anything, it suggested that workers might best cure Ross’ vacillations by physically attacking him. Naturally, the semi-anonymous leaflet horrified its readers. ‘I notice,’ commented one of Ross’ supporters, ‘that this murderous pamphlet is printed on green paper (another insult to Ireland). I would suggest, if it is ineffective, that the next one be printed on flaming red, sprinkled with blood spots.’

Unsurprisingly, after this singularly maladroit intervention, the Laidler-Baracchi group found few new recruits. Melbourne communism involved, for a time, three separate factions: the ex-IIW coterie, the VSP group, and a separate gaggle of Russian émigrés with personal ties to the Bolshevik trend in their homeland.

This complex three-way split only highlighted again the impossible distance between Guido’s personal and public life. What could Toby possibly make of her husband’s activities? From her point of view, he shared with Bob Ross the same rather strange obsessions: the reading of dry books, attendance at endless meetings, a baffling concern with events in far-off countries and impossible visions of the future. The difference between them appeared infinitesimally less than the difference between Guido and, say, all their neighbours in Darling Street—and for that matter, everyone else she knew—so that the passion that his political quarrels brought seemed utterly mystifying.

Communist unity came only after fresh developments in Sydney. After much wrangling, the Earsman-Garden group managed to agree on a joint conference with its main rival, the Australian Socialist Party: a small sect of Marxist purists whose theoretical prowess went hand in hand with a lofty condescension towards actual working-class struggles.

Invitations for this combined meeting circulated all over Australia. Peter Simonoff, the Russian who claimed the title of Soviet consul, received one, as did Tom Glynn, one of the IWW prisoners, who had emerged blinking from gaol into a very different political world.
Adela Pankhurst-Walsh and her husband Tom were the other celebrity attendees: she, the most famous radical, and he, the best-known trade union leader in the country.

In Melbourne, the VSP communist faction selected the optometrist Carl Baker as its spokesperson, while the Andrade’s group chose Guido. The two men travelled north together for what would be the foundation of Australian communism.

In one sense, it was just another meeting; one of so many they’d all been to, with a small group of earnest people working through a long agenda in a stuffy room, trying to ignore the palpable tensions between the ASP delegation and Garden’s cronies (the so-called ‘Trades Hall Reds’). Adela nursed a cranky baby on her knee; when it began crying, she hurried outside. Guido had been kept up all night with Baker’s smokers’ cough and struggled, bleary-eyed, to concentrate.

When they came to the real business of the day, it seemed almost an anticlimax. One of Garden’s allies put the motion, ‘That this conference now form a Communist Party.’ It was carried by acclamation, and the organisation that was to provide a central point of orientation for Australian politics throughout the twentieth century came into being.

The momentum of the Sydney meeting and its proclamations—widely reported in both the mainstream and the radical press—electrified the factions in Melbourne. The bitter, petty squabbles with Ross, the motions and countermotions inside the VSP: all that was in the past. They would have their own organisation. They would show what communists could do.

It didn’t take long to approach all the likely members of a Melbourne branch, nor to organise a first meeting in Parer’s Hotel in Bourke Street, just across the road from Andrade’s bookshop. Laidler chaired a meeting, at which Baker delivered a suitably fiery speech before some thirty prospective recruits. Most of the faces were familiar: Sid Gower and the Stevens brothers from the IIW, a smattering of VSPers, Lesbia’s old comrade May Francis, even Guido’s varsity friend Clem Lazarus.

The security forces watched the gathering with distinct unease, since the Investigation Branch largely shared the Communist Party’s rosy assessment of its prospects. In the intricate negotiations that led to the formation of the party, the intelligence agents detected not weakness and isolation, but fiendish cunning and meticulous preparation. The CPA’s founders were ‘experts most gifted in the art of making dregs boil’, explained the newly arrived British expert on Bolshevism, Captain George Pitt-Rivers, who identified Baracchi and Laidler among the Victorian leaders to be watched.

‘The time has come when the revolutionary incubus must be dispelled or translated into a reality,’ the captain warned his superiors. ‘It is no longer a remote peril; it is now upon us, in our midst, threatening to engulf what remains of that short thousand-year-old civilisation which the nineteenth century, hypnotised by machinery and statistics, and oblivious of human
nature and her laws, thought so permanent and unshakeable but which the twentieth century is
discovering is based upon such precarious and uncertain foundations.’

Both those seeking to make a revolution and those determined to stop it understated the
immense challenges involved in invoking the revolutionary incubus in Melbourne’s sleepy
streets. Between the mass parties Guido discussed in his Proletarian Review columns and the
tiny forces existent in Australia lay a considerable gulf, one that none of the local Lenins
really knew how to overcome. There were no manuals to explain exactly how a roomful of
people in Parer’s Hotel went about building a mass organisation in a communist fashion.

The transport strike that gripped Melbourne in the first months of 1921 illustrated the
problem since, rather than providing an opportunity for recruitment, it threw the communists
into chaos. A bigger party might have led the dispute; the CPA glumly noted that the lack of
trams made branch meetings impossible. When the comrades did gather, the uneven
theoretical knowledge of a membership drawn from so many different currents became
readily apparent. They all agreed on the pressing need for education; they all wanted to learn
communism. That meant a routine of propaganda meetings and study classes not terribly
different from that of all the other socialist sects and, however much they understood the
necessity for such patient work, it was still rather demoralising.

Guido continued to edit the Proletarian Review and assisted Laidler with Andrade’s
publication of cheap communist pamphlets; he also ran party educationals around Lenin’s
State and Revolution. The weekly schedule saw the communists holding forth on Sunday
afternoons on the Yarra Bank and Sunday evenings in their own hall, on Wednesdays in the
hall again, on Fridays at an outdoor meeting at the South Melbourne markets, and on Saturday
evenings back in the hall for a public discussion. General members’ meetings took place on
Monday evenings; the various sub-committees came together on Tuesdays. It was an
extraordinarily ambitious routine for such a small organisation, and it left Guido even less
time for normal family life.

In April 1921, Toby moved with Lelia to Queensland. The trip was ostensibly to shelter
the child from a cold Melbourne winter but it almost certainly represented the complete
breakdown of their marriage: medical advice alone didn’t explain the decision of the baby’s
parents to separate for months on end. Guido had decorated Darling Street with a huge
portrait of Karl Marx, and Toby most likely simply tired of seeing more of the German
philosopher’s bushy features than her husband. She claimed later that she and Guido
corresponded on affectionate terms, but it’s difficult not to believe that they both understood
their relationship to be over.

The affairs of the Communist Party scarcely proceeded more smoothly. The shaky
Sydney alliance between the ASP and the Trades Hall Reds broke apart even before the
Melbourne branch really became active. The ASPers declared themselves the real Communist Party, relaunched their paper as the *International Communist* and continued, perhaps with a certain secret relief, along their traditional path. Garden and Earsman countered with the *Australian Communist*, under the editorship of Tom Glynn, and sympathisers now faced the unedifying spectacle of two communist newspapers in deadly competition, each declaring itself the authentic representative of the Third International in Australia.

The Melbourne communists, with no real contact with the ASP, remained entrenched in the Earsman-Garden camp, but they found it difficult to share the Sydney leadership’s view of the split as both necessary and desirable. In the *Proletarian* (the journal quietly dropped the word *Review* as, presumably, too redolent of bourgeois contemplation), Guido laid the blame for disunity on the ASP. But he also pledged to ‘lose no opportunity to work for the reunion of this section with the rest of the communists’, a sentiment quite different in tone from the wholesale abuse the *Australian Communist* heaped on its rival.

Within Melbourne, grumbles about the Sydney leaders started to emerge. Earsman, as general secretary, swelled with self-importance, while Garden revealed his untrustworthiness during a trip to Victoria in February when he not only neglected to contact the local branch, but made himself available to deliver a lecture for the VSP—a gesture of contempt for the rank-and-file communists. As Baker put it, rather pleadingly, in a letter to Earsman from the Melbourne comrades, ‘this branch thinks that some explanation should be given’.

Meanwhile, Adela Pankhurst-Walsh, whose celebrity seemed initially such a valuable asset, showed worrying signs of the drift away from radicalism that would later see her emerge as an activist of the far Right. Tom Glynn vacillated between his newfound Leninism and his old Wobbly ideas, until he resigned as editor after a mere three months, and Baker shifted to Sydney to fill the editorial vacancy, further weakening the fragile Melbourne organisation.

To the men of the Investigation Branch, it seemed impossible that the fearsome communists could actually be so weak. They suspected subterfuge. Behind the tottering Communist Party stood, they decided, the real revolutionary leaders, a cabal of covert Bolshevist masterminds known as the ‘Secret Seven’, who recognised each other with the password ‘Kismet’ and acted as puppet-masters behind every industrial dispute and protest march from Brisbane to Wellington.

The truth was more prosaic. The disarray in the CPA’s ranks represented the difficulties faced by a tiny number of beleaguered enthusiasts, trying to set in operation doctrines which they were learning as they went along.

By May 1921, Guido, though a central figure in the Australian movement, felt far from happy about his personal and political situation. The Melbourne group continued to stagnate.
Its finances were dire, the members quarrelsome and the Sydney leadership mostly concerned with an unseemly scramble to gain Comintern endorsement ahead of the ASP.

By contrast, even as the post-war industrial upsurge in Australia ebbed away, tremendous events were taking place elsewhere in the world. Though Guido was politically estranged from Nettie, they still saw each other occasionally and she kept him informed on Hig’s overseas adventures. After embracing Marxism at Oxford, he’d made an arduous and mysterious trip to Bolshevik Russia, from which he’d returned to take up a prominent position in the Communist Party of Great Britain. ‘The impressions I got in Russia,’ he told his parents, ‘scrappy and miserably superficial as they had to be … have given me a tremendous admiration for the present rulers in Russia, have given me no hint that the Bolsheviks will ever be overthrown … and have made me a communist.’

Guido couldn’t help but envy the richness of Hig’s political experiences, especially compared to the paucity of his own. Small as the British party was, it seemed far more likely to amount to something than its Australian counterpart, mired in petty squabbles and intrigues.

He had already spoken to Toby about selling the Darling Street house but what decided him to leave Australia was an incident both unexpected, yet entirely predictable. One day, with the mess in the party and the disaster of his marriage weighing on his mind, he was walking along Collins Street when a young woman urged him to buy a flag for a charity. He stopped, bought one of the tokens and caught sight of her face, with its high cheekbones and slightly slanted eyes. Her skin ‘had the texture of a magnolia and her wide, well-shaped mouth showed two rows of perfect teeth when she smiled’.

‘I have been looking for you all my life,’ he told her, without hesitation.

They walked round and round the block for the next two hours. Shortly thereafter, they eloped and fled the country, leaving everything behind them.
Weimar
‘a somewhat dangerous extremist’

Where was Guido?

Toby had received a letter informing her that Guido no longer intended to meet her as he’d promised, without providing any details as to why or where he had gone, while his Communist Party comrades knew nothing of the movements of their leading theoretician. Nor did the theoretician’s father, who brought out another of the mini-diaries to which he turned whenever ‘the boy’ was in trouble. ‘Guido sold his house in South Yarra in May 1921 and all his furniture at the beginning of June,’ he told it. ‘He left Melbourne at the beginning of June 1921 for Sydney—I have not heard from him since which is now over three months and no one knows where he is.’

The security forces shared Pietro’s concern. Among their ranks laboured one John O’Cassidy, a charming Rumanian ex-military officer with a talent for languages, whose espionage career dated back to a stint as an agent provocateur in both the VSP and the IWW, and who could thus move relatively freely amongst the communists. ‘I beg to report,’ he told his handlers, ‘that Guido Barrachi [sic] left Melbourne early in June in what his comrades term a mysterious manner and none of the Communist Party have heard of him since.’

No matter how bad the presence of a communist, his absence was infinitely worse. Guido’s passage from mundane Melbourne into the realms of the unknown raised fearful possibilities for an Investigation Branch ever alert for the revolutionary plans of the mysterious and dreadful Secret Seven, and it was with some relief that the security forces received news from New Zealand customs officials of a passport application in Wellington by Guido and a mysterious woman who gave her name as Margaret Kennedy and her occupation as a Myer dress designer. They sought, it seemed, to travel to San Francisco. Telegraphs flashed back and forth across the Tasman, and then between the Australian states, as the agents updated each other on the character of their subject, who was ‘accorded by his fellow students and those who have come in close contact with him to have extreme ideas on socialism and its kindred forces’.

What was Guido doing in New Zealand? The investigators honed in on his companion, the intriguing Margaret Kennedy. A detective called in at the Myer department store but could find no dress designers of that name. ‘Myers and co, Ltd have been unable to trace any record
of Miss Margaret Kennedy,’ he reported, ‘and Baracchi has, no doubt, some ulterior motive for the statements alleged to have been supplied to the New Zealand government …’

That motive, the agents soon realised, was of a personal rather than a political nature. They had clipped press reports about Guido’s marriage and could compare them to the letters intercepted from Lesbia Keogh, a correspondence that, as an investigator primly noted, ‘suggested illicit relations’. With the nose for weakness so necessary in their work, the agents recognised the use to which the mysterious Miss Kennedy might be put, and they duly sent a man to speak to Toby.

That officer presented himself as the bearer of unpleasant but important news, conveyed purely for Mrs Baracchi’s own protection. He explained that her husband was seeking to travel abroad, in the company of an unknown woman, and though the government knew little more about Mr Baracchi’s activities, it would keep her apprised of developments. In the meantime, was she aware that Mr Baracchi required her permission to obtain the passport he wanted? As it happened, she was not, but as soon as she became so, that permission was most definitely not forthcoming.

They had chosen their target well. Angry, confused, understandably worried about a future that seemed to be absconding to Wellington, Toby cooperated fully. She explained her last contact with Guido, early in June. Since then she’d received no word at all—but she was adamant that she did not want to assist him in any way.

If she reacted initially in shock, over the following weeks Toby’s actions became more deliberate. She paid a visit of her own to the Brisbane Investigation Branch, seeking any further information in their possession, and though the agents had nothing to tell her, the encounter was remarkably friendly. Certainly, she showed no unease in dealing with forces sworn to destroy everything that Guido represented: an indication not only of immediate rage but a longstanding estrangement from the socialist culture to which he belonged. She was, of course, a woman abandoned, a deserted wife uncertain as to how long her stipend of three hundred pounds a year would continue and doing everything she could to protect her own future and that of her child.

For Pietro, nearly mad with worry, Toby’s conduct was unforgivable. ‘She had the infernal malignity of telling the officials of the Home and Territories Department,’ he complained, ‘that her husband had left her child behind without means of support. Damned liar!’

It wasn’t until September that Pietro received solid information. A letter came, undated but postmarked from the town of Russell, New Zealand. In it, Guido explained that he’d been suffering for the last two months from a throat illness that had brought him to the verge of death. After several operations, he’d substantially recovered and planned to return to
Australia before the end of the year. He included in the package a separate letter to Toby, which Pietro, as instructed, forwarded.

‘A few days later Toby came to Melbourne, saw me and showed me Guido’s letter,’ Pietro told the diary. ‘It said, amongst other things, that he did not intend to live with her again.’

In November 1921, Guido returned to Melbourne, in a state of near physical collapse. ‘I did not like Guido’s appearance,’ his shocked father wrote. ‘He seemed to me thin, troubled, nervous, depressed and lifeless.’

Guido, of course, had every reason to look ill. The failure of his marriage to Toby might have been inevitable, but his attempt to simply slip quietly away from the relationship, rather than take responsibility for the mess he’d created, simply brought on the crisis in the direst circumstances possible.

The one consolation in those dismal days came from the new woman in his life. ‘Margaret Kennedy’ was really Harriett Zander. Harry was young. She was beautiful. She was married to someone else.

Like Toby, she’d been a chorus girl before working in a factory, a position from which she escaped only by marrying her boss. Her elevation from the assembly line to bourgeois domesticity left her, perhaps to her surprise, unfulfilled. The union with Jack Zander, a wealthy wool classer, was passionless; Zander himself was dull. When she wrote to him explaining she was leaving him forever, he didn’t even respond: he thought, as he explained later, that ‘it was merely a woman’s moods’.

If Toby married Guido seeking security, Harry Zander fled to him in revolt from the banality of suburbia. She wanted to stretch her mind; she yearned for excitement, new experiences and new places. Her decision to abscond with Guido represented a deliberate escape into adventure and an abandonment of the position into which she’d only just clambered. To mark the transition she abandoned ‘Harry’ and became, with Guido, ‘Neura’, a name she used for the rest of her life. Meeting her several years later, an awed Betty Roland described how Neura ‘wore a large diamond ring and an emerald and diamond bracelet that glittered in the light. I thought she was the most exotically beautiful woman I had ever seen, and a more unlikely example of the wife of a dedicated communist could scarcely be imagined’.

Neura shared Guido’s easy sociability. She liked a drink. She was outgoing and she was funny. She could, when she chose, be crude, but she possessed an eye for art that took her smoothly into cultural circles. Most of all, she soon developed a genuine passion for radical politics that lasted all her life. Neura’s encounter with Guido might have been random and her elopement impulsive but, right from the start, their relationship rested on a much more solid foundation than his marriage with Toby ever had.
The New Zealand debacle put it to the test almost at once. With Guido’s descent into illness, the romance of their whirlwind departure from Melbourne lifted like a curtain and Neura found herself tending a man she barely knew through a life-threatening condition, while all around them their schemes collapsed. Such immediate adversity was either going to destroy their relationship or immensely strengthen it and, when Guido came back to Australia to face what he’d left behind, he and Neura had cemented a lasting bond.

In Sydney, he met with Toby and explained, with cold finality, that he’d fallen in love with someone else. He arrived in Melbourne and stayed at the George Hotel where Pietro, overjoyed at the return of the boy but dismayed by his condition, took him to a throat specialist for another operation. He also handed him another letter from Toby, which contained her intention to file for divorce. Toby arrived in Melbourne a few days after Guido left again for Sydney. In lieu of her husband, she confronted Pietro and told him she had been consulting her lawyers.

‘She intends to go back to Sydney and bring Guido here to arrange that settlement,’ wrote Pietro. ‘It is the money she is after. So it seems to me.’

Toby’s lawyers provided an alternative plan as to how matters might best be settled. On 10 February 1922, flanked by private investigators, she knocked on the door of an apartment in Elizabeth Bay Road, Sydney. Neura answered the door; the detectives pushed past to discover Guido sitting on the edge of the bed in his trousers and shirt.

One of the detectives asked: ‘Do you admit that you are living here with this woman?’

Guido, the newspapers later explained, ‘admitted his moral downfall’ but tried to assert a certain authority.

‘I want you to speak to me respectfully,’ he demanded.

‘We will give you all the respect to which you are entitled,’ said the detectives.

The consensus was that he was not entitled to very much. Australian divorce law revolved around moral turpitude; Guido’s discovery in flagrante delicto ensured a sordid hearing and one that would inevitably be settled in Toby’s favour.

He tried immediately to arrange terms, on the basis of an indefinite continuation of her allowance. She accepted and, in return, agreed to delay the court case until he’d left the country, though she refused to keep Neura’s name out of the proceedings—probably because she was already in communication with Jack Zander, who was filing a similar petition against his wife. The question of Lelia did not enter the negotiations. Toby already exercised more or less sole custody of the girl—and, in any case, Guido was keen to leave the country as soon as he could.

He and Neura were safely on their way to England when the Age devoted a long column to the ‘passion that wrecked two homes and provoked a double divorce’. It detailed Guido’s
university troubles and political career, listing his financial assets and lauding the charms of his wife, ‘a fair, good-looking woman of 26’. Australia had, it suggested, seen the end of ‘the strange and romanceful career of young Guido Carlo Luigi Baracchi, known in his earlier days amongst a wide circle of friends and acquaintances as an eccentric young student and latterly as a somewhat dangerous extremist’.

The hope that Guido’s career in Australia had come to an end was one that Toby fully shared—as she explained to Nettie Palmer, if he came back to Melbourne, she would see him dead—but Guido himself never contemplated leaving the country permanently. Of course, it suited him to be temporarily absent, but his real purpose was to sample Europe’s far richer revolutionary culture, with the intention of one day applying its experiences to Australia.

They landed in London in May 1922. Naturally, Guido visited Hig who, having never known Toby, reacted without shock to the encounter with Neura, even though his aunt Ina (whose religious radicalism did not extend to libertinage) had warned him about Guido’s reputation. ‘I do hope you will avoid him,’ she counselled.

Hig’s basic moralism remained intact but communism had changed the form it took, and simple adultery no longer troubled him. His own intrigues sat inside each other like so many Russian dolls. To the outside world, he displayed only a communist hostility to the Tories and the Labour Party; inside the party he supported a factional grouping called ‘the nucleus’ against the propagandistic habits of the old leadership; most secretly, he devoted himself to an agonised and fruitless attempt to romance his beautiful and spirited comrade, Rose Cohen.

Hig told Guido of his trip to Russia with his Oxford friend Tom Wintringham. In Moscow, they’d watched ballet, theatre and circus staged amidst war, starvation and want, and they’d listened, wondering, to a hubbub of talk as ragged, dirty men, desperately trying to defend a ruined city against enemies within and without, engaged in intense debate about ‘Futurism and seven other isms, each less comprehensible than the first’. Even if Hig didn’t understand much that he heard, he brought back to London a vision of ideas made real, of untutored workers seizing elegant theories and putting them to service, and in the name of the revolution, he happily abandoned his academic ambitions.

Now, Hig sold communist papers, he wrote articles and he attended meetings; his employment at the Labour Research Department, a kind of radical think-tank, was, as he explained to his parents, ‘work and hobby in one’.

Like a foal climbing to its feet, the Communist Party of Great Britain stumbled and fell with each step forward but even its ungainliness hinted at a tremendous and restless energy. When Guido took umbrage at party members’ comments on Marxist economics, he was invited to make his argument in front of the Holborn branch.
‘Such a lecture would have been impossible at a later stage,’ Guido wrote. ‘I made these criticisms without pulling any punches at all. The group argued about them but they were perfectly satisfied with my right to make them.’

Their initial exposure to British Communism was limited by the arrival of Pietro, who had decided to spend some of his fortune on an old-fashioned Grand Tour of Europe. Guido met him and ensconced him safely in the Royal Palace Hotel in South Kensington, before returning that evening to introduce his father to Neura.

The potentially tense encounter between the aristocratic Pietro and the working-class woman for whom Guido had abandoned his marriage passed surprisingly smoothly. Pietro and Neura took to each other at once; she called him ‘Father’ and he called her ‘Wom’ (for ‘Woman’), and even the arrival of the cable spelling out the terms of Guido’s divorce couldn’t dampen their good spirits.

‘All the time I was in London I saw Guido nearly every day,’ Pietro recorded in his diary, ‘and had meals together with his girl, too, at restaurant and at his flat at 87 Edgeware Road. We parted very friendly.’

After agreeing to meet again soon, Neura and Guido left Pietro in London and caught a ship to Europe, on their way to Berlin.

They rented an apartment on the edge of the Tiergarten, ominously near the canal where mercenaries had thrown the body of the communist leader Rosa Luxemburg after the unsuccessful Spartacist uprising of 1919 only three years earlier. In Berlin, politics meant the bayonet and the bullet as well as the manifesto and the podium speech. Where Australian radical cartoonists lampooned the greed of the employers, their German counterparts emphasised capitalist cruelty: the plutocrats in George Grosz’s celebrated drawings possessed the faces of prison warders atop obscene, porcine bodies, and they stared at skeletal workers with an infinite hatred.

The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) formed part of the warp and weave of working-class life, its quarter of a million members as well established and familiar in the industrial suburbs as the whistle of the factories or the evening gatherings in the beerhalls. The energetic woman convincing her neighbour to subscribe to a fundraising appeal was a communist; so was the scruffy youth on the corner hawking one of the party’s thirty-eight daily newspapers. Communism in Germany meant workers’ cycling clubs and football teams, it meant the choir practising in the few hours after work and before bed, just as much as it meant the debate in the railway workers’ lunchbreak as to when those bastards running the union would stop talking and win us the rate to which we were entitled. The lip-curling scorn with which a deputy in the Reichstag attacked the conservative benches—that was communism. It was communism when three Jewish youths excitedly debated the latest findings from the Institute for Sexual Science, and it was communism when a tired housewife
briefly laid down her washing and allowed herself to ponder the pamphlet she’d once seen and its promise of a future other than children and cooking.

It was exactly what Guido had sought.

Naturally, he and Neura joined the party at once, taking out membership in a branch that met ‘in the back room of a little inn, with a couple of glasses of beer to encourage us’. They unpacked their bags in a city gripped with hyperinflation, a legacy not only of the war and the subsequent French occupation of the Ruhr, but also of the predations of industrial tycoons for whom the devaluation of the currency provided rich fields for speculation, while it impoverished the population. Employees took their wages home in sacks; a cup of coffee increased in price while it was being drunk.

An old woman queued at the department store, shakily bringing forth the bundles of notes still fragrant of camphor from her sock drawer.

‘But don’t you see, madam?’ the clerk said, not without a certain kindness. ‘They’re not worth anything anymore.’

‘No,’ she said, her knotty hands still counting. ‘Look, it’s all there! See!’

Behind her, the line stirred impatiently.

Walking home through the Tiergarten in the cold winter of 1922, Guido came across a half-naked man, slumped hopelessly on a park bench. He was starving, pale as the snow that surrounded him. Guido retreated to the prosperous oasis of their apartment but found the larder temporarily bare. He gathered what he could find—some bread, three eggs and a little milk—and brought it back to the man, now shivering convulsively on the bench. He ate the bread and the milk with an animal hunger, and Guido broke the eggs into the cup.

‘Can you eat raw eggs?’ he asked.

A sliver of dignity returned. ‘They’re better cooked,’ said the man.

This was Germany, the nation of Beethoven and Goethe, of technology and order, and, in one of Europe’s mightiest cities, the people were not yet versed in the habits of starvation. Poor they might be in the workers’ districts but they did not eat raw eggs. They knew little of the terrible choices that absolute destitution made everyday necessity: the decision as to who in the family would find a full plate on the table and who would eat scraps and who would try to sleep, grinding their teeth in hunger.

In 1922, they began, slowly, to learn.

Guido took a position as an English language editor on International Press Correspondence (abbreviated, Russian style, to Inprecorr), the weekly publication of the Communist International. Inprecorr presented the views of the highest communist authorities, in articles intended for reprint in union and labour journals the world over. Its very existence told of the dizzying audacity of the revolutionary project. The Yiddish needleworker in the
Bronx possessed, on the surface, little enough in common with the militant printer in Dunedin, New Zealand. Yet the Comintern spoke to them both through Inprecorr, investing them and all those like them with a measure of its own power, and encouraging them to see their own tribulations and achievements as facets of a battle raging all across the globe.

Inprecorr was the centre of a web of solidarity, the medium through which the ancient dream of international fraternity took solid twentieth century form. The editorial skills Guido had learnt at Trinity now served him in an office where, in place of well-fed divinity students and the sons of lawyers, he sat beside men crisscrossed with the scars of class war. He shared a desk with William Norley Clark, gaoled for three years when he refused to fight for England’s King during the Great War. Another editor, who answered to Siegfried (or, sometimes, his aliases tangled, Gottlieb) had survived a youth amongst the ragged anarchists of Paris and their impossible war against the police and society. Many of his friends went to the guillotine; he served five years solitary confinement as a terrorist before fleeing to revolutionary Russia. Later, the world would know him as the novelist and poet Victor Serge, but at Inprecorr he was merely another footloose rebel, drawn to a city by the imminence of revolution.

The growth of the KPD had, in fact, fostered a polyglot expatriate community within which Guido and Neura moved easily. Guido spoke German and most of those they met knew a little English but the real lingua franca was communism itself. It allowed, say, the American radical publisher Alexander Trachtenberg (whom Guido met browsing the enormous Vorwaerts socialist bookshop) to find common ground with Paul Frohlich, Rosa Luxemburg’s biographer and a founder of the German party, who took them all to dinner in the Reichstag restaurant. Their beliefs rendered foreigners oddly familiar to each other, since each could have parachuted into the homeland of the other and oriented themselves more or less accurately in a strange political landscape, identifying allies and detecting enemies, and charting the general line of march. Wherever their origin, whatever their occupation, the movement gave them a common identity, subordinating differences and binding strangers together, not just with each other, nor simply with the oppressed of far-off lands, but with the achievements of those who had struggled before and the promise of a better world to come.

Guido couldn’t help but contrast the fraternity that tied them to the future with the chauvinism linking other German parties to the past. Within the KPD, he met a Caribbean radical, his dark skin entirely irrelevant as he outlined his views on the national question. By comparison, when Guido and Neura, at the suggestion of their landlord, attended rallies of the social democrats, they heard the speakers excoriating the Jews for the inflation rampant in the republic. They refused, naturally, any further invitations but encountered the same sentiments
elsewhere, as shopkeepers muttered about the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and decaying
officers of the last war dreamed of a man on horseback, clearing out the Jews and the Reds.

With the traditional parties of the Left and the Right captured by mediaeval prejudice,
communism beckoned all the more brightly to the hopeful, the clever and the idealistic. It
seemed, at times, that the best people of a generation were gathering in Berlin. The Indian
philosopher and activist Manavendra Nath Roy, dark and handsome despite his pockmarked
face, arrived from Mexico to write on independence for the subcontinent, in articles
immediately banned in his homeland. Anna Louise Strong, the American radical journalist,
settled briefly in Berlin, and Guido and Neura watched as the mails simultaneously brought
her a royalty cheque from the US and a commission from Trotsky to document the German
events in the manner of John Reed’s *Ten Days that Shook the World*.

There were other visitors, too. Pietro, as per their arrangement, arrived on Christmas Eve,
still wrapped in a cloud of pre-war liberalism of the kind which had so vanished from
Germany. Guido installed him in the Palast Hotel: ‘A very sumptuous kind of place,’ Pietro
acknowledged, ‘where I had a grand bedroom with hot water in the room and every comfort I
could desire.’ For Christmas, Guido and Neura—whom Pietro had taken to calling ‘the
children’—presented the senior Baracchi with a scarf and slippers. They ushered him around
the city’s cultural attractions: concerts, the theatre, Viennese sausages eaten in a beer hall.

Though Guido took great delight in showing his father the workingmen’s quarters, Pietro
barely seemed to register the city’s swelling crisis. He visited the Potsdam observatory; he
paid no attention to the sullen expressions on the corners and thoroughfares. He understood
Guido’s happiness, and that was enough. When he left Germany for Italy early in January,
Pietro wrote of his son: ‘He is infatuated with Berlin, chiefly, I believe, on account of the
wonderful bookshops. He spends all the money he can spare, on books. He has already a
room full in his fine little flat in a pretty road facing the Tiergarten. The books he buys are
mainly on economics and social questions … He looks very happy and comfortable … In any
rate, I need not bother about him for two years. I know where he is and what he is doing.’

Few other observers would have airily considered a career as a professional revolutionary
in the Germany of 1923 such a safe billet, nor classified the boy’s array of Marxist literature
as innocuous studies of ‘social questions’, most especially since Guido had just sent to the
*Proletarian* in Melbourne an article entitled ‘The Dialectic of Street Fighting’, in which he
argued for the continuing utility of barricades as a method of confronting a modern army. But
Pietro maintained an invincible naivety about his son’s politics. ‘He seems to be all right,
content and satisfied,’ he wrote, much later that year, ‘but what he is really doing and what
his objects are, I really don’t know.’
He was, at least, perfectly correct about Guido’s happiness, especially as it related to Neura. Guido could never have shared Berlin with Toby, but Neura found it as giddying as he did and, shucking the last traces of the respectable wife she’d been in bourgeois Melbourne, she re-emerged as ‘Comrade N’, happily living in sin in the decadence of Weimar. She learned the revolutionary songs that the agitprop teams sang in the streets, she carried a Luger in her pocket and, overcome with rage at the brutality of police at a demonstration, she spat full into the face of a mounted officer. Being there, together, with the great events moving around them, lent their daily life a curious richness, so that light felt brighter and the flavours tasted more intense, and every instant seemed to count, both for its own sake and for history. The adrenalin of constant activity, the exhilaration of revolutionary hope, the surging sense of solidarity with the cheated and disenfranchised: all the emotions of a city in revolt helped cement their still relatively new relationship with a bond much more solid than Guido had ever known with Toby.

On a brief trip back to England in March 1923, they married at a registry office.

Throughout that year, the crisis in Germany slowly ripened. The faces in the evening crowds were grey and pinched with hunger, the children wizened as monkeys. An agitator stood on every corner, guttural slogans competing with the street traffic. Police met hunger marches with batons and horses and worse. On one demonstration, tanks dispersed the crowd, sending Guido scurrying for safety along the cobblestones of an alleyway.

Within the common people, hope jostled with despair. When Neura accompanied Guido to work one morning, his office door swung open to reveal a soldier with fixed bayonet occupying the premises. They kept walking, without looking back, only returning later when the raid was over. Throughout Berlin, as reactionary gangs targeted militants with blackjacks and heavy boots, the KPD responded with its own defence squads, and violence hung heavy in the air. Guido watched, fascinated and appalled, as a children’s group marched by in the street, its cheerful young members singing: ‘Blood must flow!’

This, it seemed, was a revolution: the tension in the shoulders of the nationalist thugs; the new alacrity with which copies of the party paper *Rote Fahne* passed from hand to hand; ‘The Internationale’ hummed softly on a tram; the arguments everywhere you went; the people growing, changing, putting words to their desires, discovering dreams of which they’d never before spoken. Each day brought fresh strikes and street marches, as Berliners refused to accept that which they had previously seen as inevitable. Each night, the reactionaries settled the scores of the morning before with gunshots and blackjacks.

Everyone agreed that something, somewhere, had to give way.

In Saxony, the KPD gathered to assess the situation, and Guido was there, too. Vendors walked up and down the auditorium, keeping the delegates supplied with beer, wurst and
newspapers, but the mood was anything but relaxed, for everyone believed this to be the last conference before the revolution. Throughout the congress, banners of the martyred Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht swayed above the speakers’ platform, a constant reminder of what was at stake. Fascism was in power in Italy; in Germany, there was no shortage of armed fanatics with military training, waiting for the moment to finish the Reds and the Yids. If the KPD waited too long, the initiative would shift to the nationalists. If the party moved too soon, it would be isolated and weak, and reprisals would follow. Either way, many people would die.

Guido found the proceedings deeply impressive: the breadth of the KPD, its deep roots in the experiences of ordinary Germans, the knowledge and culture of its leaders. The KPD’s main figures—Pieck, Brandler, Thalheimer and Zetkin—were skilled politicians, able to move a crowd or hold it quiet without notes or amplification. Yet they were also theorists, steeped in a Marxism reinvigorated by the Russian revolution, and the debate on the conference floor saw the titans of the party hurling quotations like thunderbolts. It was not a matter of lifeless dogma but rather arguments about an immediate crisis: a decomposition of the German economy that seemed to have emerged directly out of the pages of Marx’s *Capital*, and a political impasse familiar from Lenin’s descriptions of Petrograd in 1917. Theory had become practical, and practice confirmed theory, so that even the respectable newspapers discussed a choice between a military dictatorship and a Marxist revolution.

Yet Guido did not understand the strains within the organisation, nor their connection with much deeper problems in the Soviet Union where the Bolshevik regime had survived half a decade but only at tremendous cost. The libertarian council state of 1917 had evolved into a beleaguered garrison, led by a sclerotic and top-heavy Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Russian leaders saw a potential uprising in Germany as one way to rejuvenate and democratise their own revolution, with the tremendous resources of a modern state helping to overcome the backwardness of Russia, and so they intervened heavily in the debates inside the KPD. By doing so they spread, like some new virus, the bureaucratisation within the USSR, and the KPD leaders, already deeply divided by the stresses of the situation, became infected with the intrigues taking place amongst the Russians.

The process was subtle rather than overt, a strange, deforming force swaying policy, as a buried deposit of iron might gently skew an explorer’s compass. At *Inprecorr*, Guido worked under Gyula Alpari, a survivor of the brave but disastrous Hungarian revolution of 1919. Its bloody failure, leaving most of his companions dead or in prison, seemed to Alpari to be evidence of the inferiority of the non-Russian leaders, and he thereafter became an unquestioning follower of Moscow. Bloated and grey, he took no decisions and risked no
judgements, but instead watched the winds blowing in the party and trimmed accordingly. He answered any of Guido’s objections with a cynical repetition of four monosyllables. ‘Ich bin der chef!’ he said. ‘I am the boss!’

Still, even Alpari showed, just by his presence, a courage foreign to a later generation of Stalinist hacks. He might not have been the same man who defied the White Terror of 1919, yet his seniority in the KPD of 1923 rendered him eligible not for a fat pension but a gaol cell—or, more likely, a bullet in the neck—should events not proceed according to plan.

And it seemed less and less likely that they would.

In October, Guido and the rest of the Inprecorr staff were summoned to a meeting. A KPD official, his eyes bloodshot and sleepless, addressed them. His message was simple. The day they had been working towards for so long had arrived. Insurrection was imminent. The party needed to know the forces at its disposal. Who amongst the staff would volunteer for action when the day came?

There was a pause, while they absorbed the news. This was it—the hour in which history sped up, a rare chance when the future dangled in the balance and their actions might make the difference between a tilt towards progress or a descent into reaction. Of course they all raised their hands.

Then, remembering the machine guns and the working-class blood that flowed during the Spartacist days, one of them asked: ‘What do we use for weapons?’

‘There aren’t any at present,’ was the reply.

‘So what do we do?’

‘Go out in the street when you get the word,’ came the answer.

‘And die,’ someone added.

It wasn’t a refusal nor, really, was it cynicism. Yes, they would take to the streets when the time came, naturally they would. But they sensed the uncertainty in their leadership and they feared the worst.

The members threw themselves into preparations. KPD study groups pored over Trotsky’s notes on the planning behind the 1917 uprising in Russia. Militants gathered maps of public buildings, stockpiled whatever guns they could find. Railworkers argued about the best techniques to expropriate ammunition trains. Leaflets fluttered into the barracks, urging the soldiers to obey the people, not their officers. Communist women arranged to rendezvous with their sweethearts in the army.

‘You’ll bring some grenades with you, won’t you, dear?’ they asked.

Outside the party, the rumours circulated, distorted and amplified by repetition, until all of working-class Berlin felt itself tiptoeing, waiting for the signal, waiting for something to
start. The tension swelled, swelled again, became unbearable and then, when still nothing happened, it began to ebb away.

The leadership of the KPD, awaiting direction from the Soviets, would not commit, terrified equally of moving too soon and not moving soon enough. So the militants, as tense as athletes on the blocks, waited for a signal that never came until, with the initiative slipping away, the party suddenly called the whole thing off. In Hamburg, where the instructions didn’t get through, a small group of communists took to the streets—and were promptly shot dead.

It was a disastrous result, a demonstration of ineptitude that demoralised the best activists and emboldened their enemies. A population captured briefly by hope and enthusiasm sunk back into dejection and indifference, while the Jew-baiters and the militarist demagogues became correspondingly braver. In Munich, a few weeks later, Adolf Hitler launched his first putsch. It, too, quickly collapsed, but the effrontery of the Nazis suggested that in Germany the centre could no longer hold, and hinted at the nature of the rough beast slouching towards Berlin.

The effects of the failure of 1923 upon international communism were profound, though few fully understood them at the time. A German success would have shifted the centre of the movement from backward Russia to modern Europe, creating a theoretical and organisational counterweight to Moscow’s influence. The German failure resulted in precisely the opposite. It convinced the Soviet leaders that they could expect little succour from the European workers, and so spurred Stalin’s isolationist policies of ‘socialism in one country’. It reinforced the authority of the Soviet party (which had, after all, made a successful revolution), and diminished the independence of communists elsewhere. If the KPD, the largest and most successful organisation in Europe, had bungled so badly, what chance did others have? Better not to risk too much, better not to stick one’s neck out, better to simply follow Moscow’s directions. The unattractive careerism that Guido saw in Gyula Alpari became, after the German failure, more and more the norm, as communism transmuted from an international tendency in which the Soviets were merely first among equals, to a bureaucratised Russian movement, with the foreign parties very much subsidiary detachments.

Guido and Neura had witnessed a historic turning point. Of course, they didn’t know it for, at the time, it all seemed temporary. Yes, they had to flee Berlin, as a scaled-down Inprecorr was evacuated to the comparative safety of Vienna. Yes, it had been a setback, a defeat even, but they saw no reason to consider the revolutionary prospects other than momentarily dimmed.
Rejecting a half-baked Comintern invitation to become spies in Scandinavia, the Baracchis retreated to London, where Hig inducted them into the life of the British party. It had, over the past year, finally begun to progress, under the influence of the rising leader Harry Pollitt, whom Hig had adopted almost as a surrogate father. A boilermaker by trade, Pollitt’s socialism sprang from a sense of terrible injustice inflicted on his family. ‘Every time [my mother] put her shawl round me before going to the mill on wet or very cold mornings,’ he wrote later of his childhood. ‘I swore that when I grew up, I would pay the bosses out for the hardships she suffered.’ This was not a simple revenge but the righting of a wrong both universal and deeply personal. For Pollitt, communism meant the destruction of the regime that condemned his mother and all people like her to aching lives of meaningless toil, while, merely through an accident of birth, women in no way better (and in most respects worse) enjoyed the good things of the world.

His close ally Rajani Palme Dutt came from a background much nearer to Guido’s. Half-Indian, half-Swedish, Dutt had seemed destined for a brilliant intellectual career before the geometric elegance of Marx’s dialectic worked its spell on him. He spoke out against the Great War and when his professors punished him, he valued their wrath far more than his extraordinary academic results (one of the highest firsts in Oxford’s history). After the foundation of the party, Dutt devoted himself to communism with a truly monkish asceticism. Guido came across him one day in headquarters in King Street, kneeling as he banged out an article on a typewriter, as if the revolution could not spare the time it might take to find a seat. Guido fetched him a chair; Dutt didn’t even notice.

Over time, the slow corruption seeping through the Comintern would enter the veins of Dutt and Pollitt, debasing intellect into casuistry and loyalty into subservience, and reshaping both men into dutiful, dreary apparatchiks. But they were, in the beginning, very different: dedicated and disciplined, yes, but also idealistic and human. In the evenings, Guido and Neura joined them with Hig’s cheerful, clever young friends from the Labour Research Department, talking of poetry and Freud while Tom Wintringham poured beer, Pollitt recited ‘The Boilermaker’s Funeral’ and Hig, happily freed from Nettie’s cloying influence, sang smutty songs.

Still, the much smaller British party seemed a little anti-climactic after the heady German events, and the Baracchis began to think of Australia again. Guido had not remained in touch with his Melbourne friends, probably because, like Hig, he felt the distance between those absorbed in the movement and those outside it too great to overcome. Nettie, in particular, complained about his failings as a correspondent; as she put it, rather mournfully, ‘Guido must have shed so many series of friends that he has no other habit by now.’ But he’d always intended to return and—thanks to Neura’s ability to bewitch the customs officials—he’d
smuggled out of Germany a huge trove of previously untranslated seditious texts that he wanted to take back home.

They left early in 1924, with the good wishes of the CPGB comrades ringing in their ears and Pollitt promising that they would meet again to ‘have a good party and sing rude songs’. A considerably less festive reception awaited in Australia. The turmoil of the conscription debate had eased and the country remained reasonably politically stable, certainly much more so than Germany. The battles of the Great War had not touched Australian soil; the post-war radicalisation had been contained, and the nation remained very much in the hands of the kinds of people who had always ruled it. In fact, it was Guido’s generation increasingly coming into its own. His old school captain Stanley Bruce was Prime Minister, his kindergarten playmate Richard Casey served as political liaison officer in London, and Robert Menzies was building a reputation not just as a barrister but as a man going places.

Guido’s own curriculum vitae, of course, looked rather different. He was thirty-seven years old, the guilty party in a high profile divorce case, and a known agitator identified by the security forces as ‘a returned envoy’ from revolutionary Berlin. ‘Everyone remembers Guido,’ said the *Sun*, accosting him almost as soon as he stepped off his ship. Rather unwisely, Guido agreed to the newspaper’s request for an interview, and though his remarks consisted mostly of unexceptionable comments on German politics, the headline proclaiming him ‘Melbourne’s Lenin’ was not calculated to smooth a reintegration into Australian life.

With their respective former spouses still embarrassingly present in Melbourne, it made sense for Guido and Neura to decamp to Sydney, where the Communist Party’s leadership was based and Christian Jollie Smith had offered Guido a job. He could, she proposed, act as the local representative of Workers International Relief, a body established as a radical alternative to the mainstream aid organisations that tied their charity to political preconditions.

The move suited Neura, too. She and Guido both had reputations but, if romantic notoriety earned a man a reputation as a cad, it rendered a woman liable to far more ugly descriptions. Besides, after Berlin, Neura, too, was a committed radical; in Sydney, almost at once, she joined Guido on stage in the Communist Hall, giving the comrades her impressions of the German events.

They settled in a small house in Fox Valley Road, Wahroonga, on the outskirts of Sydney. Nearby lived a rather unstable young woman called Esther Wait, vaguely interested in politics, and friendly with the novelist Christina Stead, then a trainee teacher. Wait introduced Guido to Stead. Later, Guido decided that Stead resembled ‘clear, running water’, but what he actually told her was that she looked like a teacher—a remark that, though he did not know it, could not have been more offensive, since Stead felt tremendously sensitive
about her appearance and utterly abhorred teaching, a profession she associated with a spinsterism that she desperately sought to avoid.

She continued to visit the Baracchis in Wahroonga and went with Guido to the occasional meeting—but repaid his initial clumsiness by sketching him and Neura in her first novel *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. The book was finished years later and its narrative conflates several different eras, but, in places, it draws directly on Stead’s experiences in the early twenties. Catharine, the troubled main character, derives from Esther, with whose mental problems Stead was fascinated, while Fulke Folliot (‘gay, small, plump and mellifluous’) and his wife Marion (‘dark hair and a broad half-Slavic face’) are modelled on Guido and Neura. The Folliotts live in ‘a pleasant home in a wood’, into which guests of all kinds drop throughout the day and the night. They work hard organising meetings and rallies, but carry ‘high the rushlight of their metropolitan culture at the same time, talking Cézanne, Gauguin, Laforgue, TS Eliot, Freud and Havelock Ellis’. Marion recounts their German adventures and sings to her guests the revolutionary songs of the working class. She and Fulke are very much in love and do ‘not conceal their passion for each other. The many visitors to the house looked sidelong at the bedroom, as if at that rare and desirable mystery, a happy union’.

They are, however, essentially dilettantes, protected by wealthy parents and more attracted by the glamour of rebellion than the actuality of revolution. The one truly admirable communist in the novel dismisses them as lightweight dabblers. ‘They are romantics,’ he explains. ‘They would be delighted to have a police raid. Ever since their marriage they have had nothing but splendid adventures with the police and frontier guards.’

Stead’s portrait captures the bookishness in Guido, a trait that forever limited his effectiveness as an orator and as a political leader. When Fulke addresses striking workers, his speech sails straight over their heads, in much the same fashion that Guido’s serialised translation of the German philosopher Karl Korsch’s *Quintessence of Marxism* sat rather uncomfortably next to the chatty ephemera with which Jock Garden filled the *Workers’ Weekly*.

But in real life the decidedly non-proletarian Guido and his exotic partner never attracted the suspicion that in Stead’s novel other communists direct at Fulke and Marion. Communism in the twenties was much looser and more accepting than it later became, and many of Sydney’s motley band of would-be Bolsheviks possessed their own peccadilloes and idiosyncrasies. Since Guido himself never showed the slightest discomfort about his background, they shrugged off his well-bred manners as an irrelevant quirk. He’d arrived in Sydney with the tremendous cachet of his *Inprecorr* posting and a personal recommendation from Harry Pollitt, and the party accorded an almost embarrassing deference to the man the *Workers’ Weekly* described as ‘one of the finest Marxian scholars in Australia’. 
In his absence, the organisation had, if anything, slipped backward. The Melbourne branch had entirely collapsed; in Sydney, many of the Trades Hall Reds had departed for more opportune fields. With the economy booming and union militancy at a low ebb, the whole party hung by a thread. Only a hundred or so members paid dues. Many branches were entirely dysfunctional. So dire had the situation become that the relentlessly optimistic party press resorted to Kiplingesque verse, not denying the organisation’s problems, but positively exalting in its hopelessness:

It’s easy to cry that you’re beaten and die.  
It’s easy to crawfish and crawl  
But to fight and to fight, when hope’s out of sight,  
Why, that’s the best game of all!

It was the old story: the gulf between ideas and action. In Australia, a continent away from the Moscow bureaucracy, Red Russia retained all its lustre, its mere existence providing a permanent rebuke to every act of bastardry of capitalist Australia. The world could be different—the Soviets had shown it. Yet the prestige of the USSR, the stature of its leaders and their writings, did not necessarily make more palatable the routine drudgery of a fringe party in an era of economic growth and industrial quiescence. Unionists who genuinely mourned Lenin’s recent death expressed no spontaneous desire to sell the Workers’ Weekly in the street or attend meetings that, because of their marginality, always seemed faintly cranky, and the local communists struggled to demonstrate a nexus between their own prosaic activities and the great deeds of their fraternal parties abroad. Yes, they provided an oasis of progressive sentiment in an arid, conservative nation: denouncing the treatment of Aboriginal domestic servants, championing the cause of Egyptian, Japanese and Javanese workers, and urging ‘serious class conscious men’ to take responsibility for the problems facing the women of the working class. But they remained a handful of overworked people, struggling to keep a paper coming out and meetings happening as advertised, and the distance between what the party sought and the actual resources available to it created a temptation for shortcuts, magic keys that would open the door into real, practical politics.

Guido sat, every day, at the Workers International Relief desk in the party office, and he watched, with horror and fascination, as Jock Garden, the CPA’s main leader, tried to bluff a mass organisation into existence. As evening drew near, and most of the staff departed, Jock began his real work: negotiating sotto voce over the telephone with John Bailey from the Australian Workers Union—the same John Bailey denounced in the communist press as the leader of ‘a crowd of ballot box crooks and union bosses’. This was Tammany Hall rather than Karl Marx, the traditional chicanery of a union apparatchik dressed in a thin veneer of radical rhetoric, and it sowed a predictably disastrous harvest. In accordance with Comintern
policy, Australian communists sought affiliation with the Labor Party, hoping to make contact with the Labor rank and file. But with Garden at the helm, the CPA veered between crass adaptation to specific Labor policies and shrill denunciations of Laborism in general, in confusing zigzags that left the members surly and demoralised.

The return of Esmonde Higgins, a few months after Guido, offered a brief ray of hope. Hig remained as emotionally conflicted as ever, using the voyage home to draft reproving memorandums to himself. ‘Women,’ ran the heading of one of his stern missives, ‘Why I haven’t yet made up with one?’ The reasons, he decided, included ‘intentional non-sexishness’, ‘cowardice’ and ‘kept going by imaginings, general activity’, but the main explanation required only the single word, ‘Rose’.

These maudlin reflections did not fool the security forces, which identified Hig behind his broken heart as ‘a particularly objectionable individual’ and a dangerous revolutionary. The Sydney comrades agreed with the second assessment at least. In the same fashion as they’d welcomed Guido, they greeted Hig as an exemplar of European communist sophistication, an initiate into the mysteries of successful party building and a man capable of steering them out of stagnation and into the deeper currents of political life.

Hig felt none of their confidence, especially once he’d surveyed the extent of the party’s dysfunction. Even in the dog days of the British group, the members—or at least those to whom he’d been closest—had always possessed a camaraderie, an excitement in themselves and each other and their joint project. The Australians, by contrast, seemed cynical and lost. ‘A handful of derelicts marooned away from everywhere,’ he reported to Harry Pollitt. ‘Bluff, intrigue, faction, indiscipline, hypocrisy, talk, ineptitude—this is all the party is able to trade on now.’

Whatever his doubts, Hig joined Guido on the national executive, where both men were loaded down with responsibilities. Hig took charge of the party paper and tried to establish an Australian version of the Labour Research Department, even though the funds he’d been promised never eventuated and he remained perpetually impoverished. Guido ran party education, facilitating the small groups that teased meaning from the intimidating pages of Engels, Marx, Luxemburg, Lenin and Korsch. He even convinced Garden, infinitely more inclined to tactics than theory, of the need for a party journal and, during the last months of 1924, built up, on the strength of his reputation as a scholar, considerable pre-publication orders for a new theoretical magazine, the Communist.

The journal provided Guido with an outlet for the material he’d brought back from Germany, linking the struggling party with a richer intellectual culture. But its launch in January 1925 also revealed something about the particular skills Garden brought to his position. Government regulations required newspaper staff to swear an oath in the Supreme
Court before their publication could be licensed, a stipulation that posed a ticklish ethical dilemma for atheists like Guido and the others. In the forbidding courtroom, the stern legal official glared at their silence, while they hesitated about pledging their allegiance to a deity in which none of them believed.

With the future of the paper in doubt, Jock winked to his comrades. ‘Mumble, “So help me, Bob!”’ he whispered.

It took an instant before his meaning sunk in. Then ‘So help me, Bob,’ they duly swore and, with the court propitiated and Marxist honour preserved, the Communist was launched on its godless way.

Together, Guido and Hig sponsored a party essay competition on how communists should operate in Australia and awarded the prize to a paper arguing for more attention to be paid to the specifics of local conditions, an eminently sensible proposal that went absolutely nowhere. For one thing, the Comintern, increasingly dogmatic in the wake of Lenin’s death in 1924, looked askance on local groups adopting their own innovations; for another, the worse the organisation fared, the more Garden relied on political quackery and get-rich-quick schemes.

In the New South Wales state election of 1925, the CPA decided to stand its own candidates, not as a propaganda exercise but as a major venture into electoral politics, and the derisory vote received, including by Garden himself, caused even more demoralisation. Here was evidence in depressingly numerical form of their irrelevance to the real lives of ordinary people. To rub their noses in defeat, at the federal election a few months later, Prime Minister Bruce accused the Labor Party of pandering to Bolshevism, and thus effortlessly succeeded in elevating communism into a public issue in a way that the communists themselves found impossible.

The year 1925 also saw a worldwide strike by British seamen. Though the CPA threw itself into solidarity work—even allowing the strikers to sleep in the Communist Hall—the campaign was marred, for Guido, by the party’s vainglorious tendency to lecture the seamen on how much it was doing for them, and how tremendously grateful they ought to be. As minute-taker for the strike committee, he sensed a distinct irritation amongst the weary unionists over the party’s role, and he sympathised with them.

‘Things here are awful,’ Hig had told Pollitt, as early as March. ‘It would be kindness to kill us off … I hate the party and nearly all its works.’ In July, he resigned his editorship of the Workers’ Weekly, and went looking for paid employment.

He was not alone. The humid, enervating atmosphere of the political doldrums had engulfed the group, so that the slightest organisational exertion rendered the members irritable and exhausted. Some comrades resigned over doctrinal quarrels and some quarrelled with
other members, and some simply drifted further and further away from the routine until one day they realised, almost as a surprise, that communism no longer meant anything to them at all.

Guido’s departure involved a combination of all of this. In part, he despaired of Garden’s leadership. The man possessed a roguish charm and, despite his incorrigible dishonesty, Garden had ‘his moments of truth, when he could blurt out what others were mortally afraid to’. In essence, though, he was a conman, whose basic opportunism careened easily into overt adventurism: by the end of 1925, the party had been reduced to trading on Bruce’s image of the Bolshevist menace, blustering about violent revolution in a way that, to Guido at least, seemed to invite provocateurs.

It was a further illustration of the problems caused by isolation, for, with such a tiny membership and none of the ballast possessed by mass organisations, the communists were all too easily blown off course. Hence Guido’s interest in his old friend Laidler’s activities in Melbourne. After the collapse of the party branch there, Laidler had established what he called the Labor Propaganda Group. It operated inside the Labor Party, seeking to radicalise its rank and file. This, thought Guido, might be a way out of the Sydney impasse. If the party continued as it was, its antics would simply discredit communism amongst the best Australian militants. Given that there seemed no way out of the situation in the short term, why not dissolve the CPA and form a militant ginger group inside the ALP, to propagandise for Marxism until more propitious circumstances allowed the formation of a properly communist grouping?

The proposal, which Guido put to the December general meeting of Sydney members, displayed a remarkable naivety about how the international movement now worked. Though the Comintern identified the Australian party as one of the weakest sections in the world, they sought not its dissolution but an increased centralisation, and simply would not allow it to disband. In any case, though a sizeable percentage of the members sympathised with Guido’s concerns, the label of communism was a precious possession, associating the party with the USSR and distinguishing it from the other radical sects, and few were prepared to so easily abandon it.

For Neura and Guido, it was different. They had recreated an echo of Weimar in their Wahroonga house, with its art and books and constant guests and conversations forming a bohemian enclave so overt that their conservative neighbours, as Guido later recalled, would ‘come regularly to the dividing fence and try to soothe me by singing “God Save the King” in stentorian tones’. The Baracchis felt no emotional pull to the tiny, dispiriting meetings of the CPA, with their petty gossip and constant spiteful intrigues. After the well-wrought party they’d encountered in Berlin, Garden’s gimpick organisation seemed an unbearable piece of effrontery, and one that the movement would be better off without.
Guido had made up his mind. When his proposal to dissolve the party received only derisory support, insufficient even to warrant a vote, he sent in a letter of resignation. ‘The party itself,’ he wrote, ‘is, as an organisation, such a tragic farce that I cannot bear to be associated with it a moment longer.’

It was a decision that he would regret for years to come.
Guido was, in 1925, one of the party’s most famous faces, and news of his departure intrigued friend and foe alike. Impoverished and in despair, Hig had temporarily left Sydney to seek work but, when he heard of Guido’s decision, he penned a long, anguished letter to his old comrade demanding a fuller explanation. Around the same time, Richard Casey drew Guido’s resignation to the personal attention of Prime Minister Bruce, inviting him to gloat over the evident disarray in the communist camp.

Casey’s glee was precisely the kind of reaction that Joe Shelley, the leader of the re-formed Melbourne branch, sought to avoid: at the party’s Sydney conference, he complained that ‘people would now really believe that there was something wrong in the Communist Party when a man like Baracchi dropped out’. To quell such rumours, and to chasten any members sympathetic with the renegade, the meeting resolved that—his resignation notwithstanding—Guido was to be expelled, thereby locating any fault with him, rather than with the organisation he was leaving.

Guido and Neura were already contemplating a return to Europe and, as the bitterness in the party became clearer, Guido pushed forward his date of departure and sailed out of Sydney on Boxing Day, at more or less the same time as his former comrades settled upon his expulsion. When he boarded his liner, he discovered that it was also being used to deport the leaders of the British seamen’s strike. He watched from the deck as two very different crowds gathered. Closest to the liner assembled the friends and families of the paying passengers: the men in their coats and ties, the women with new hats and pretty dresses, laughing and crying and holding the coloured streamers entangling the ship. Behind them stood men who were hefty and grimy with cracked boots and stained clothes, and who affected an indifference to the phoney protocol of departure. As the propeller turned and the vessel snapped its streamers, this long, thick line of wharfies began to sing: not a mournful song of departure but a quick-step fighting tune, raucous and rude.

Guido, delighted, mouthed with them the words of the old Wobbly song, a defiant celebration of poverty and rebellion that moved the respectable husbands to place a protective arm around their wives’ shoulders:

Hallelujah, I’m a Bum
Hallelujah! Bum again!
Hallelujah! Give us a handout!
To relieve us from pain!

‘It was for [the seamen’s leader] and his mate,’ Guido wrote. ‘For me, too, I knew, even if
the singers didn’t. For many more, I hoped, afloat and ashore. The more the merrier. And we
were on our way.’

Yet Guido’s claimed fraternity with the union militants and, beyond them, the workers of
the world was now much more problematic. He secretly delighted in the cheek the stewards
showed the first class travellers, and he smiled when he heard the strains of ‘The Red Flag’
wafting up from below deck. But he no longer belonged to the Communist Party, Moscow
itself had been informed of his expulsion, and many Australian communists regarded him as a
deserter. Certainly, for the rebel seamen, there was nothing to distinguish Guido from any of
the other bourgeois passengers. He had been a Wobbly, yes, and he’d been a communist. But
what was he now?

When Neura joined him in Britain a few months later, he penned her a poem noting,
almost wearily, how they had stayed together in ‘towns and townships of the countries of the
earth’, before concluding:

Only the room numbers
Have I forgotten.
All else about these bedrooms
Stands out sharp in my memory,
And abides in my mind forever.

For YOU have blessed these bedrooms,
Even the most ungodly among them
With your presence,
And made them holy.

It was a declaration of love, but one tinged with recognition of shared isolation. When he
resigned from the CPA, Guido had compared quitting the party to undergoing a major
medical operation; in Europe, he learned exactly what the surgery had excised. The
Comintern’s influence extended across the seas, with the national parties forming local
detachments of the one global army. Militants everywhere marched under the same banner
and toiled towards the same goal, sharing their victories and mourning their defeats, no matter
the distance that separated them. An ex-communist, especially one who retained his ideals,
felt, in place of this unity, an all-encompassing solitude. While he could still see the
connections between the (just concluded) general strike in Britain and the seamen’s dispute in
Sydney, and the links tying both of them to the workers’ state in the Soviet Union, Guido stood outside the invisible network of solidarity. He watched, as if behind glass; he remained a man apart.

The new authoritarianism of the communist movement made the separation ever more stark. At the Comintern, Karl Korsch, the German thinker whom Guido so admired, fell out of favour, as Moscow asserted its control over philosophy as well as strategy. Zinoviev—at the time, allied with Stalin—thundered: ‘If we get a few more of these professors spinning out their theories, we shall be lost.’ Korsch’s expulsion from the KPD soon followed, a clear admonition to intellectuals to keep in line. For Guido, there was a more personal warning. A copy of the *Workers’ Weekly* eventually reached him, and in it he read a description of himself as the expelled leader of a Right-wing, bourgeois faction, labels now attached to him like a bell to a leper. Though the Baracchis visited the Labour Research Department, they made no effort to contact the Communist Party of Great Britain, aware that, as deserters from the Australian group, their welcome would be much less friendly.

While they were in Britain, an entirely unexpected calamity struck; one that, for the moment, swept all else aside. Guido sat reading under the statue of John Stuart Mill, near the Thames Embankment, when he heard a voice say, simply: ‘Well?’ He glanced around. There was no one near—but he noticed a strange blemish had appeared on his shin. About 48 hours later, he received a cable explaining that Pietro had died in hospital after an unsuccessful operation for cancer, his passing coinciding exactly with the moment Guido heard the mysterious voice.

His father had been the still centre of Guido’s life, his unfailing defender in every crisis, and a source of unconditional love and support. In 1924, in a letter to a friend, Pietro had touched obliquely on his relationship with Guido. ‘Poor silly parents!’ he wrote. ‘Their role is to love their children, do everything to help them and be ever and ever a nuisance to them … I am sure I will be wanting to go and spend next Xmas with [Guido and Neura] and, very likely, I may not be wanted. Yet, the Comedy must be carried on. That’s life.’

If Guido, like so many sons, had indeed pushed his father away, how much worse did this make the knowledge that he would never see him again? The scar on Guido’s leg—which, whether of psychic or psychosomatic origin, marked him for the rest of his life—provided the visible symbol of his loss, which hurt all the more because it came at a time when his political direction seemed so unclear. The very ambiguity of the message which Guido thought he’d heard from his father tells its own story. Well, asked Pietro from his deathbed. Well, what is your life about? Well, what have you achieved? Well, have you lived up to my expectations? Well, what now?

‘Well …’ could have meant any of those things. It probably meant them all.
Given the ocean separating him from his father’s body, Guido could not attend the funeral, but it was clear he would have to return to Australia. Pietro’s death left him an orphan; it also rendered him phenomenally wealthy, one of the main beneficiaries of the Petty estate. He needed to be in Melbourne to formalise his inheritance, and so the Baracchis cut the rest of their travels down to a quick journey through the United States.

They arrived in a nation of prohibition and jazz and talking films, with Rudolph Valentino’s body lying in state at Campbell’s funeral parlour. It was also, they soon learned, a country of vicious, systemic racism. In a hotel in Los Angeles, Guido’s telephone rang and a male voice asked: ‘Is that George Jackson?’

‘No,’ he answered. ‘This is Guido Baracchi.’

‘What?’ said the man in a tone of deep disgust. ‘I thought I was talking to a white man!’

Travelling with Neura across the country in a sleeper train, Guido chatted briefly with one of the Pullman porters, the iconic black stewards who provided the mostly white passengers with ritualised Southern deference: making beds, serving drinks and otherwise easing the journey. Originally formed from freed slaves, the porters were taught to answer to ‘George’, and augmented their meagre salaries by begging tips. In 1925, they’d begun to organise. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters became the first black-controlled union.

‘What’s the lowest thing on God’s earth?’, the porter on Guido’s train asked him. Before he could answer, the man told him. ‘A Pullman porter.’

Again, Guido took an immediate delight in this nascent class consciousness, more wonderful given the Steppin Fetchit servility which the Pullman Company sought from its employees. Yet his expulsion—that missing communist limb—ached more than ever. The US party was busy building the American Negro Labor Congress. As a communist, he would have stood shoulder to shoulder with the rebellious blacks; as an ex-member, he was simply another well-meaning tourist.

The voyage back to Australia raised the issue of his status in a different fashion, when the Baracchis found themselves aboard the same vessel as Guido’s first love, Mabel Emmerton, and her husband, the Wimbledon tennis champion Norman Brookes. The Brookes were, of course, scions of the bourgeoisie, outside whose paper mill in Alphington Guido would, in years to come, distribute tracts urging the workforce to make bloody revolution. Yet aboard the steam ship Ventura, Baracchi the insurrectionist, his bags stuffed with subversive literature, spent the voyage envying Norman’s impeccable technique at deck quoits and reminiscing with Mabel about their roaring days in Toorak.

On the ocean, he could smooth over the contradictions with wit and charm; back in Australia, they yawned open once more. His notoriety remained undiminished, and Smith’s Weekly—one of the new breed of racy newspapers, specialising in scandal and revelling in
gossip—alerted its readers to his return. The ‘notorious communist’ was coming home to inherit 30,000 pounds.

‘Will fortune change the views of Baracchi?’ the paper asked. ‘Melbourne comrades of the Third International,’ it explained, ‘are awaiting the return of sometime communist Guido Baracchi, who must soon demonstrate whether it is true that in his case a capitalist is a communist who has got his whack … No doubt the best people, as well as the comrades, are ready to forget the past and remember the cheque book.’

Perhaps the best people were—certainly, Mabel and Norman had been friendly enough—but the comrades were quite a different matter. Laidler’s Labor Propaganda Group, the organisation through which Guido had planned to return to politics, had collapsed and, though the new communist branch remained tiny, the hesitancy of its early days had become a shrill and abrasive confidence. Joe Shelley, the tough old sailor leading the Melbourne group, revelled in precisely the kind of bloodthirsty phrase-mongering that Guido abhorred, taking pleasure in explaining to opponents that, after the revolution, their throats would be cut, a task he anticipated performing personally.

Nor had Shelley forgiven Guido for his departure. ‘I fear that he delights to speak evil of me,’ Guido told Hig. ‘He … can only garble any gossip that comes his way in what he conceives to be the interest of the CP until it ceases to bear the least resemblance to the truth.’

He could not work under Shelley, whom he regarded as stupid by nature, authoritarian by training and responsible for driving the most independent elements out of the organisation. Laidler refused point blank to rejoin the refounded party; May Francis left when Shelley deliberately scheduled communist meetings to clash with the Labor College, an institution he regarded with deep suspicion.

Given the choice between Shelley’s group and the college, Guido took the college. ‘My own opinion,’ he said to Hig, ‘is that the college is doing the only working-class education in this State that matters a damn.’ Though it had drifted away from communism towards a rapprochement with mainstream Labor, the college reached relatively deeply into the unions, and it united Guido with the activists he admired most. May Francis (now May Brodney) devoted her considerable energies to Labor College education, as did Guido’s old IIW comrade Frank Stevens. Both May and Frank knew the value of ideas. She laboured in a factory, organised for her union, campaigned against conscription and agitated for socialism, yet still found time to study psychoanalysis and read TS Eliot aloud with her friends, while he, a working-class immigrant, transformed himself into one of the finest social theorists Guido had met.

Guido signed up to teach economics at the college. He used a rough self-penned textbook for an intensive class with a small group of workers who discovered something of their own ungrasped capabilities even as they worked through definitions of use and exchange value.
The remaining ties that bound the Baracchis to the CPA were mostly personal. There was Hig, of course, but Guido also regarded Jack Kavanagh, a Canadian activist playing a leading role in Sydney, with a great deal of respect. Kavanagh features in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as Whiteaway, the orator whom Stead contrasts favourably with Folliot’s bookish performance. In reality, the two men admired each other both politically and personally. Guido regarded the meticulous, straightforward Kavanagh as a welcome change from Jock Garden, and even when they saw few other party members, he and Neura eased some of Kavanagh’s financial woes by temporarily caring for his thirteen-year-old son Billy. They enrolled him in school and did what they could to foster his political development, encouraging him to read Eugene Sue’s *Mysteries of the People* and to send in contributions to the Young Comrades’ page of the *Workers’ Weekly*.

Guido and Neura joined the St Kilda branch of the Labor Party, in an attempt to put into practice the strategy for which Guido had argued in Sydney. Labor possessed a much more lively internal life than Shelley’s floundering sect, with an active rank and file membership and animated local meetings in which Guido could deliver lectures on ‘The Socialisation of Industry’ and Neura could show her mettle as a speaker and an electoral canvasser. The temper of their branch was such that it could find room for the bookseller Harry Barker who, despite his expulsion from the Communist Party, still advertised his enthusiasm for the Russian revolution by naming his first son ‘Lenin’—a moniker that the boy, as soon as he was able, prudently amended to ‘Leonard’.

Still, the political level of the membership varied immensely. At one meeting, Ernie Hart, the Labor College secretary, fell sick and couldn’t attend, and when Barker, from the chair, made a sympathetic reference to the good fortune of the branch in possessing a ‘class conscious printer’ like Ernie in its ranks, Mrs Hart sprang suddenly to her feet, shouting indignantly at the chairman, ‘I think you’re class conscious yourself!’

The inevitably less theoretical atmosphere of the ALP (compared to the smaller socialist groups) made such cultural clashes common. On another occasion, Guido and Neura attended a party picnic on the beach at Point Ormond. Their group sat at long wooden tables and, when Guido left his seat to retrieve the volume of *Capital* he’d been reading on the sand, he returned to find a strange woman seated in his place. He politely asked to return, explaining that he belonged to the party and that plenty of other seats were available.

She looked at his heavy book and mild appearance, and responded with appropriate scorn. ‘Nick off with yer Bible!’ she said.

Nonetheless, despite its difficulties and frustrations, work in the ALP provided some insulation from the Comintern’s baleful influence. In the Soviet Union, Stalin, after defeating Trotsky on his Left, turned to ridding himself of rivals on the Right—a process that convulsed
the entire communist movement into an epileptic ultra-radicalism. The world, Stalin insisted, had entered a ‘Third Period’ in which tremendous social upheavals were always and everywhere on the agenda. In these great battles, non-communist radicals would inevitably mislead and betray and so, under the slogan of ‘Class Against Class’, party members should treat union leaders and social democrats as ‘social fascists’, worse and more dangerous than the overt Tories. As a result, the German communists, confronted by Hitler and his thugs, found themselves explaining to incredulous workers that the pressing threat came, not from the Nazis, but from the other socialist parties.

The predictably catastrophic results mattered less to Stalin than the opportunity to root out any remaining independent thinkers. Precisely because ‘Class Against Class’ was so manic, those who consented to its logic conditioned themselves to accept whatever analysis the Soviets produced, in a process that destroyed the healthiest traditions of Australian socialism and completed the Stalinisation of the movement. When the CPA’s existing leadership hesitated about some of the Third Period’s wilder excesses, the Comintern threw its backing behind a younger and more obedient faction, encouraging it to systematically root out the old guard. Kavanagh was humiliated and marginalised; Bert Moxon, for the Stalinist grouping, denounced Hig as ‘our petty-bourgeois editor … whose only qualification is that he spells well’.

It was a bewildering, disorienting time. Demagogy pumped through the veins of the party, but the onset of mass unemployment seemed to confirm Stalin’s argument and provided a basis for the communists to grow. The party’s fevered rhetoric might have repelled many unionists but it proved less of an obstacle to the jobless, who could relate its hysterical clamour to their own dire reality. After years of stagnation, the CPA suddenly found would-be recruits lining up outside its Russell Street offices, even as the party descended into a frenzy of ultraleftism.

Guido watched as the Communist Party’s first real breakthrough coincided with the political marginalisation of the members he respected most. In Melbourne, the new leader Dinny Lovegrove specialised in provoking violent stoushes with the police: Guido remembered him as ‘stom[ping] around the [party] office in a pair of dirty old sandals looking like a tramp’.

As for the kind of patient, high-level workers’ education Guido favoured, the attitude of Snowy Partridge, a leading Melbourne member, illustrated how matters stood. ‘If anyone criticised Marx,’ Guido said later, ‘[Snowy] would either hit them or threaten to hit them with the words, “A man ought to knock you!”’ He had a theory that for Marx to be such a great man with such a knowledge of human nature he must have been a great drinker and womaniser … [The CPA] was a typical Third Period outfit capable of all kinds of excesses in all kinds of direction—excesses sometimes very unpleasant and sometimes of a comic opera nature.’
The Baracchis moved to Ivanhoe, into a big house near the Yarra: ‘surrounded,’ said Guido, ‘with artists and gum trees’. Though old and architecturally unprepossessing, Larnoo was comfortable and, for the first time, they had a place of their own, where they could unpack the rows upon rows of Guido’s library. They hung their art collection, so that Norman Lindsay etchings of satyrs, nymphs and centaurs frolicked across the walls; they moored a canoe on the riverbank; they purchased Jack and Molly, the Alsatians, who delighted Neura and protected the property from locals curious about the domestic affairs of notorious Reds.

Despite the rumours circulating locally about these neighbourhood communists, the Baracchis’ contacts with the Communist Party had dwindled substantially. The party leadership occasionally approached Guido when it required money: he paid a fine that Shelley accrued in 1928, and a year later agreed to a request from Christian Jollie Smith to settle a libel suit on the party’s behalf. But the only members he saw socially were those on the very fringes of the organisation.

One of Shelley’s more unlikely recruits was the bumptious teenager Judah Waten who, restless and argumentative, chafed against the ossification of the organisation. In his autobiographical novel *Scenes of Revolutionary Life*, Waten’s protagonist notes bitterly that ‘even in the Communist Party, youth was misunderstood, with the ancients forever lecturing the young’.

Finding in Ivanhoe a freedom impossible in the CPA, Waten occasionally trekked out to argue politics and art with Guido. He persuaded a small group of radical would-be writers and would-be artists to collaborate on a literary magazine he called *Strife*, its inaugural issue timed to coincide with a demonstration of the unemployed. *Strife* was, proclaimed its editorial, part of the worldwide movement against capitalism. ‘All who accept the permanence of the present regime,’ Waten explained, ‘whether as protagonists or complacent nay sayers and futilists, are our foes. All who believe in the permanence and validity of conscious and creative liberating energy, our blood brothers and friends.’

The police responded to this cry for artistic and political freedom by arresting Waten and his art director Herb McClintock for vagrancy. A blasphemous poem by Brian Fitzpatrick provoked a raid on the *Strife* office which threw its boy editor into further turmoil—the room had been borrowed from a business associate of his father, now less than impressed by the notoriety of the premises. In a panic, Judah took the remainder of the print run to the Baracchis’ home and abandoned them to the Yarra where, as Guido recalled, it began to rain (‘as if in sympathy’) until the river rose from its banks and flooded the property.

‘Finally the waters receded, quickly,’ wrote Guido, years later, ‘and the strangest sight burst on our astonished eyes. The flood had brought to the many submerged trees a strange
flowering and left them thickly and gaily festooned with innumerable copies of *Strife* caught in their branches … This is the way the strife ends, not with a whimper but a bang.’

Much as he loved living by the river, Guido endorsed Kenneth Slessor’s description of Melbourne as a ‘mastodon of bleeding stone’ that:

Sprawled on earth’s dugs, repeats its type again,
Boasting, as archaeologists have shown,
A giant’s body and a louse’s brain.

He agreed with Hig about ‘the horrors of life in Melbourne’ and, denied the comfort of communism, he sought out the city’s artistic subculture. He developed a friendship with the architect Walter Burley Griffin, whose democratic, communal and ecological aesthetic he greatly admired. Griffin was commissioned to build a house to replace Larnoo and drew up an ambitious design for a split-level residence with all its rooms facing onto the Yarra River; the work, unfortunately, never went ahead.

Guido and Neura occasionally joined the younger pupils of the painter Max Meldrum in their carouses, where artists with scandalously long hair and shaggy beards would meet for long and boozy discussions at the Latin Café or in the studios of Colin Colahan or Justus Jorgensen. Though the Meldrumites were largely apolitical, they cultivated a communal, almost collectivist, spirit and delighted in roister and philosophical debate to the point where, as one wag noted:

The followers of Meldrum
Paint but seldom
They are mostly employed
In studying Freud.

At Jorgensen’s house in Brighton, Guido saw for the first time the young playwright Betty Davies who, after the critical and popular success of her play *The Touch of Silk*, was slowly drifting into the Meldrumite orbit. Neither thought much of their meeting. She knew, like most of Melbourne, of Guido’s reputation but considered him outshone by the dazzling Neura, resplendent in fur coat and jewels.

‘On first acquaintance,’ Betty wrote, in one of her volumes of memoir, ‘[Guido] left me unimpressed. Not at all good looking, of middle height and rather mild in manner, nothing like the flamboyant figure I had expected him to be … I had expected to meet a fiery-eyed swarthy Italian and not the sandy-headed, blue-eyed Australian with a diffident manner and somewhat halting speech.’

In any case, theirs remained, for the time being, a fleeting encounter. Neura fell ill in 1930, and for her convalescence, the Baracchis set off on another trip abroad. After the failure
of the German revolution and the defeat of the British general strike, the focus of the communist movement had turned to the developing world, and the Baracchis, not coincidentally, embarked on a cruise through the East that took them to most of the current revolutionary hot spots.

Guido recorded only a few cryptic lines about what must have been an extraordinary adventure, at a time when few Australians ventured into Asia. In Java and in Tokyo, in Shanghai and Saigon, they witnessed economic crisis coupled with colonial oppression, producing both unspeakable poverty and heroic resistance, and they could not help but see how the fraternity of 1917 stretched everywhere they went. They watched communist militants leading strikes throughout Asia, they found Lenin’s works on sale in Shanghai and they saw the American communist journal *New Masses* displayed in Japan.

Guido’s own political isolation irked more than ever. No matter how the scenery shifted, whether he travelled in Europe or Asia, the problem remained the same—he still believed, but he no longer belonged.

With the world in revolt, the peculiar idiocies of the Melbourne branch seemed much less important and, when they returned to Australia towards the end of 1930, Guido’s mind was made up. In November, the Communist Party launched a new front group called the Friends of the Soviet Union. Both Baracchis immediately signed up.

The Australian economy was undeniably in crisis. Unemployment stood at more than 20 per cent, industry lay stagnant, and fascist gangs and secret paramilitary organisations stirred throughout the nation. Yet, as the Western world sagged into economic chaos, the Soviet Union declared record growth rates. The figures were inflated; they rested on the utter immiseration of Russia’s rural population—but at the time, they provided for many people (and not just for radicals) obvious proof that the USSR had freed itself from the laws of capitalist accumulation.

Guido’s old anti-conscription ally RH Long put the matter nicely in a poem he sent to the *Workers’ Weekly*:

Sing a song of Russia,
A country gone awry,
Where Paradise is sought on earth
Instead of in the sky
And they whom J. Christ spruiked for,
The lowly and oppressed,
Have made the palace of a Czar
A home where workers rest.
Long’s willingness to loan his gentle rhymes to a paper crammed with shrill denunciations of the ‘Federal Fascist Party’ and anguished self-criticisms by disgraced ex-leaders revealed the reservoirs of goodwill into which FOSU could tap. ‘Class Against Class’ appalled Percy Laidler as much as it did Guido, but he happily agreed to act as a spokesman for the new organisation and, before long, FOSU (invariably pronounced ‘Fossyou’) dances were taking place every Saturday in an old factory in A’Beckett Street, with kerosene-soaked sawdust covering the floor, posters lauding Stalin’s Five-Year Plan, and the MC interspersing his call of the dance with announcements of meetings and demonstrations.

Audrey Blake, later a party leader, recalled these dances that she attended as a teenager for their vigour and their colour, with their distinctive combination of communist modernity and the European tradition of community music and dance. She found FOSU through Huffshi Hurwitz, a Russian Jew, ‘a very foreign-seeming person to Australians in those days [with] dark brown, frizzy hair which he wore in what today would be a modified Afro’. Like many FOSU regulars, Huff worked in a factory, but spent his free hours debating painting, politics and poetry in Doeey Din’s Chinese café. This was the milieu from which Waten’s _Strife_ had emerged: young radical intellectuals, contemptuous of conventionality and eager for sensation, throwing themselves into whatever culture the city could provide. They listened to jazz; they scoured the books in the Leonardo Art Shop; they drank beer in the workshop of the violinmaker Bill Dolphin; they argued politics everywhere.

FOSU provided them with one meeting place but they also congregated at the homes of anyone prepared to engage in their endless discussions of socialism and art—the cottage of the small businessman Itzhak Gust, for instance, or the Fairfield home of the artist and inventor Abe Newmark, a mansion ‘filled with painting and sculpture’ where ‘even the doors were held open with sculptured wood and stone’.

Larnoo, naturally, became one of the more popular venues—the ‘Ivanhoe riverside salon’, as someone dubbed it. The Baracchis were extroverted and charming, knowledgeable and cultured; their parties were legendary affairs, with kegs of beer foaming in the backyard, gramophones wailing jazz, and the revellers divided between those debating the politics of modernism and those making love in blankets under the hedge. Neura celebrated New Year’s Eve with a Chinese dragon and fireworks, and the throng of communists, bearded artists and unemployed bohemians spilling out onto a respectable Ivanhoe street as 1931 dawned further scandalised the neighbourhood.

These new intellectual radicals made their presence felt in the university as well, tentatively at first but with growing insistence. A Labour Club had emerged on campus in 1925. It now advertised rather coyly in _Farrago_ as an institution ‘for the use and abuse of those interested in political and economic questions’, even though it included a small nucleus.
of communists. So unprecedented was a university body sympathetic to Marxism that the
Communist Party—for a while, at least—allowed its members to work alongside ‘social-
fascist’ Laborites, in a manner Stalinist dogma rendered impossible elsewhere.

In 1931, at age forty-four, Guido re-enrolled as a student. He signed up for Australian
history and for history of philosophy, but his interests remained more political than scholastic,
and, just as in the old days, he didn’t bother to sit his exams. Even more than FOSU, even
more than the ALP or the Victorian Labor College, the Labour Club allowed him to play the
high-level pedagogical role to which he was best suited, and so throughout 1931 and 1932 he
lectured at Labour Club events, ran study groups for members and hosted club functions at
Larnoo.

The campus radicals of the thirties embraced a more Byronic style than the generation of
the war years, dedicating themselves to tortured love affairs, TS Eliot’s poetry and the
consumption of copious quantities of beer. The Labour Club’s long-haired and voluble Cyril
Pearl stalked the Shop, referring casually to the banned Lady Chatterley’s Lover as ‘Lady
Chat’ and dismissing the respectable majority of students as ‘stooges’. His friend Alwyn Lee,
whose willowy good looks made him a pin-up for many female undergraduates, shared
Guido’s passion for James Joyce and journeyed out to Ivanhoe to listen to a precious
phonograph record of Joyce reciting his work. The elegant English writer Bertram Higgins—
‘a visitant,’ Nettie Palmer said, ‘from the world of Eliot and Valéry’—accompanied them
and, as the record ceased turning, sighed a one word appreciation: ‘Poetry!’

In July 1931, Pearl and Lee, with Higgins as their poetry editor, launched the avant-garde
magazine Stream, most likely with Guido’s financial support. In the Stream offices Guido
first encountered the young painter Noel Counihan whose biographer describes Guido as
‘gentle, tolerant and imperturbably amiable. His mouth constantly turned up at the corners
towards a smile and he laughed readily as one idea briskly followed another. He was widely
read, not only in politics and Marxism but also in literature and the arts. He was probably the
most cultivated man Noel had yet met’.

Where Waten’s Strife had featured on its cover a McClintock linocut of a worker
straining to escape from entombing darkness, Stream showed a sprite cavorting through a city
landscape, Eliot’s poems clutched ostentatiously in its hand. Stream possessed the sole
Australian rights to Ezra Pound’s poetry but it balanced its sympathy for high modernism
with a general commitment to radical politics, in a tension exemplified by the symposium
advertised in its final edition: a discussion of Australian writing under the symptomatic title,
‘Paris or Moscow?’

The opposition between the two iconic cities boiled over at one of Abe Newmark’s
parties where Jack Maughan, a taciturn Gallipoli veteran and waterside tally clerk, took to
arguing with Bertram Higgins about the relationship between art and socialism. Though he had painted Stream’s cover, Maughan identified far more with Russia than with France and, unable to prise Higgins away from his particularly patrician brand of modernism, he settled the debate with a swift punch to the poet’s head.

Neura pulled them apart. A FOSU regular, she had become a figure to be reckoned with, held in awe by a younger set whom she could both out-argue and drink under the table. Many thought her the most beautiful woman they had ever seen, but they all feared her temper. At one of the Larnoo parties, the young painter Jimmy Flett, another Strife supporter, somehow caused offence and she struck him again and again with Molly the dog’s leather lead until he fled the house with his face bleeding. Counihan tried to calm her; she threatened him with the same treatment. Flett clambered up onto the fence of a nearby property, a vantage point which allowed him to yell in the general direction of Larnoo: ‘You pack of fucking red Bolshevik bastards.’

The formation of the Workers Art Club represented an attempt to synthesise the rival claims of art and politics into one organisation, with its founding members including Guido, Lee, Counihan, Pearl, Maughan and Gust. It proclaimed the indivisibility of aesthetic experimentation from social struggle with the rallying cry ‘Art Is a Weapon’, and hired a poky little space above a shoe shop in Russell Street to serve simultaneously as gallery space, meeting hall and sleeping quarters for unemployed members like Counihan. In the WAC’s rowdy discussions, Guido lectured on ‘Art and Marxism’, basing his address upon his readings of Bogdanov, the Soviet theorist of ‘Proletcult’ (proletarian culture). When the group launched itself on the public with a selection of Maughan’s brutal but powerful paintings, Guido wrote the program notes.

The Maughan exhibition drew together most of the city’s radical intelligentsia: the women in red blouses, the men in red ties, all wearing expressions of intense seriousness. Kylie Tennant attended the opening night, and, in her novel Ride on Stranger, she depicts the gallery of a ‘Proletarian Club’ which displays ‘black and white sketches; battle-fields with figures in the foreground, usually with a string of entrails proceeding from them, skulls in helmets, mutilated and blinded and unpleasantly distorted corpses in all shapes and sizes. The guests gave these decorations the admiration they deserved and exclamations of: “Superb stuff you know. What I like is their strength and vigour” were accompanied by a critical appraisal with the head on one side and the eyes half shut’.

Though the WAC provided an easy target for satire, it was, as Blamire Young, the Herald art critic, noted, ‘a most significant exhibition and the first of its kind that Australia has seen’, and he praised the ‘thoughtful address’ with which Guido opened the exhibition and explained the aims of the club. Guido, probably one of the few people in Australia to have
read Bogdanov, argued that, under capitalism, a non-class art was impossible and he lauded Maughan as an ‘organiser of his class’. Yet he explicitly opposed a purely utilitarian art, since, ‘even in the midst of the struggle against capitalism, our proletarian artists should endeavour to widen as far as possible the field of their art; the struggle itself will be helped and not hindered thereby’.

While far from a complete resolution of the problem posed by political art, Guido’s relatively nuanced approach at least provided a framework in which the issue could be discussed. But it came immediately under attack from both the Left and the Right.

On the one hand, though many art critics agreed with Young as to the show’s significance, they universally objected to its politics. ‘Maughan’s work is not art at all,’ said the Argus reporter, ‘it is cartooning—some of it quite good cartooning.’

The Communist Party, on the other hand, maintained a disapproving silence about the whole exhibition. Its cultural commissars later denounced modernism as capitalist decadence; for the time being, the party simply considered art unimportant, and an interest in it as therefore suspicious. The WAC received a commission to paint banners for the May Day march but when its dramatic section—which Guido thought ‘truly vital and creative’—staged Ernst Toller’s play Masses and Man, the Workers’ Weekly reviewer accused it of social fascism, since it was ‘muddling and confusing the working class’. One communist simply declared that the WAC consisted of ‘a pack of petit-bourgeois degenerates’.

The Labour Club faced parallel problems, squeezed as it was between the intensely conservative university on one side and the Communist Party’s spiky impossibilism on the other.

With Jack Lang’s Labor government in power in New South Wales, conservative society rippled with rumours of revolutionary intrigues, and loyal citizens thronged to anti-communist vigilance groups. Early in 1931, the Labour Club hosted a lecture by the Sydney University philosopher John Anderson who suggested that communism be considered not as a seditious plot, but as a genuine social theory. In response, outraged students formed a university branch of the militantly anti-labour All For Australia League, pledging ‘to take all necessary steps to combat Soviet and communist propaganda in the University’. The martial ring to their declaration was no accident. At the University Regiment, a fascistic White Army already maintained a presence, its members taking home machine guns on the weekend to rehearse for smashing the expected Red rising.

A few weeks after Anderson’s visit, Guido addressed the Labour Club, giving his impressions of Asia in a lecture entitled ‘A Radical Looks at the East’. The subject—and the speaker—posed a direct challenge for conservatives who, of course, knew the legend of Guido’s 1917 dunking. The heckling of the rowdies who crowded the theatre contained a
distinct note of menace and, though nothing particularly happened, the threat of violence hung in the air.

Throughout 1931, controversy over the presence of a Left-wing club on campus continued to simmer, with conservative students complaining of ‘communist and disloyalist tendencies’ not only in the Labour Club but also in *Farrago* itself. If the Bolshevik conspiracy that Right-wingers identified at the Shop never eventuated, the proportion of Labour Club members embracing communism was steadily increasing. The decision by Ralph Gibson, the son of a philosophy professor, to join the party sent shock waves through the radical intelligentsia, for, if the impeccably mannered Gibson could find his way into the rough ranks of the Communist Party, there was no excuse for others not to do the same.

By early 1932, the Labour Club members ostentatiously addressed each other as ‘Comrade’ and planned to send a delegation to the Soviet Union. Sam White, a member of this proposed Russian expedition, bore the brunt of the inevitable reaction. Another precocious bohemian, with a felt hat slung rakishly over his long hair, White smoked as incessantly as he talked. In April 1932, he attended a meeting of the Historical Society where Ernest Scott spoke on the historical writings of Thomas Macaulay. White, from the floor, put the case for Marxism. An enraged Professor Scott denounced White in unacademic terms—he was, the professor said, a ‘buffoon and baboon’. That meeting nearly ended in violence; shortly afterwards, the university registrar told a *Sun* journalist that, in countering subversion, ‘students themselves could take the most effective action and in extreme cases in the past, the lake had been useful’.

Duly prompted, on 2 May, a gang of Right-wingers, led by the young Edward Dunlop, then an Ormond College boarder and amateur boxer, later famous as the war hero ‘Weary’, dragged White from the speakers’ platform of the university Debating Society and tried to dunk him. Suspecting something afoot, the Labour Club had already mobilised unemployed supporters who, with considerably more experience of street-fighting than the college boys, used home-made batons to disperse White’s assailants. The next day, *Farrago*—once more in the hands of the Right—recalled the Baracchi episode.

‘Force is suggested,’ said the editor. In the afternoon, Dunlop, at the head of three hundred angry anti-communists, broke down a door in the union building to seize White and other Labour Club members. They were dragged to the lake, dunked and forced in front of a jeering mob to sing the national anthem.

Guido’s name had emerged repeatedly in the battle over the Labour Club and he did his best to console White and the others, who were understandably shaken by the experience. White, like many of the club members, was Jewish—and there was a reek of the pogrom in the enthusiasm with which the mob turned upon him.
Guido himself—with no reputation to lose—was less affected by the attacks from the Right than he was by an assault from the Left. Early in 1932, the Labour Club had decided to produce its own journal. The university administration baulked at the proposed title *Hammer and Sickle*; the club grudgingly accepted *Proletariat* as a substitute.

The first edition duly appeared in April, its cover adorned with a Jack Maughan image of a muscled labour colossus—an image that spurred ‘Bourgeois Bertie’ in *Farrago* to draw unkind comparisons between the actual physiques of the club members and the ‘striking physical specimen’ adorning their magazine. Guido contributed a short piece on Filippo Buonarroti’s role in modern socialism but the centrepiece came from John Anderson, who provided an article on the working class—the first of a commissioned series.

But Alwyn Lee and Sam White, *Proletariat*’s editors, had not reckoned with the CPA’s sectarianism. The party leader JB Miles personally reviewed the journal for the *Workers’ Weekly* and denounced ‘the unspoken liberalism of its editors’, manifested through the inclusion of articles by non-communists and ‘social fascists’. Guido’s article, in particular, was ‘flabby’; it didn’t concentrate sufficiently on Marx and Lenin. The Labour Club itself should avoid any intellectual aspirations since it existed solely to ‘save certain working-class fellows, who are in the University on scholarships, from the deadening effect of that institution’.

When Anderson, entirely unintimidated by the bluster, suggested that the *Workers’ Weekly* misunderstood the purpose of *Proletariat*, Miles ratcheted up his rhetoric even further. Anderson was a ‘petty-bourgeois’, the journal was an ‘imposition’, its editors ‘liberal conciliators’. As for Guido, he was someone who ‘in 1925 left our party, a liquidator capitulating to reformism, therefore a renegade’.

Anderson responded with a full-scale critique of the CPA leaders. The personal abuse they heaped on critics was, he claimed, evidence of bureaucratisation within the party. ‘The right of the leadership to criticise the rank and file should be accompanied by a right of the rank and file to criticise the leadership; and the leadership shows no leadership at all unless it welcomes, and further develops, the criticisms that are offered.’

Miles then settled the debate: not by argument but by instructing Lee to confiscate the professor’s article before it reached the rest of the Labour Club, a piece of petty skulduggery that spurred Anderson to emerge as a fully fledged and public critic of communism.

Guido responded quite differently, applying, in the immediate aftermath of Miles’ thuggish intervention, for readmission to the Communist Party.

His reservations about its leadership and his suspicion of aspects of party culture remained. That year he had written to Nettie, trying to reassure her about Hig who, though
still a party member, had been stripped of all influence by the leadership and lived in complete penury.

‘He is too valuable to the party for them to let him starve,’ Guido told Nettie, a cynical assessment hardly suggestive of the awe-struck servility the central committee tried to inculcate in its members. He continued to cooperate with the ‘social-fascists’ of the Labor College, allowing it, for instance, to publish his new translation of Engels’ *Principles of Communism*, a document previously unknown in Australia.

On the other hand, he acknowledged that he had been wrong in 1925. Those who stayed in the Communist Party had built something; those who had left could show very little for their efforts. As he wrote to the *Workers’ Weekly*, the organisation had grown ‘as a real workers’ party to a degree that makes it barely recognisable to me today as the organisation to which I belonged in 1925’. In the polarised political climate, it was no longer possible to work within the Labor Party and ‘it seems to me time for all those like myself, who, up to a point, may have seen possibilities of doing good work in the socialisation movement [inside the ALP] definitely to choose between the movement and the CP’.

In 1932, Bertram Higgins completed his masterpiece ‘Mordecaius Overture’, a poem describing the reaction of a Romanised Jew, who had witnessed the Crucifixion, to the destruction of Pompeii. Mordecaius, confronting an agonised choice between the familiar past and a future that holds both revelation and unspeakable danger, asks himself:

Go where the lightning points? Or where the penumbra glows?
Madness, to tempt new lands by a forked and fitful path
While the old House, split to its hearth still stands.
Down the long slope I go …
There where the calm clouds pile, how softly unrolls
The Past in a white cloud of waving scrolls!

Higgins dedicated ‘Mordecaius Overture’ to Guido, and the poem suggests his hesitation before the paths that faced him.

If 1917 had been a revelation, the Depression confronted him like a volcano. Capitalism, it seemed, was breaking up; the old house split to the hearth. The conservatives relied, more and more, on overt violence, tacitly supporting the fascist gangs and anti-labour secret armies that were springing up across the country. Workers everywhere lacked bare essentials, while commodities piled up in storehouses. It was misery through over-production rather than shortage, the classical manifestation of the inhumanity of the market. The failure of the capitalist system could be read in every soup kitchen and dole queue, just as FOSU documented the inexorable advance of socialism in the actuarial language of the Five-Year Plan. So many poods per hectare of wheat sown, this many million tonnes of iron smelted and
that many megawatts of electricity generated—and all while the smokestacks of the Western world lay almost entirely idle.

The local party might seem foolish and unpleasant but there was, much of the time, a heroism in its folly, a refusal to countenance any response to repression and exploitation other than full-frontal confrontation. To overcome the prohibition on outdoor meetings, Noel Counihan locked himself in a cage in Sydney Road, Brunswick, where, before a crowd of thousands, he shouted out a speech until the police beat through the bars to arrest him. To celebrate the anniversary of the Russian revolution, the party directed FOSU—over Laidler’s incredulous objections—to defy the fascistic Police Commissioner Blamey’s ban on demonstrations. ‘There were enough party members and non-party stalwarts,’ Ralph Gibson recalled, ‘to require continuous police bashing from the starting point outside the Capitol Theatre to the Temperance Hall in Russell Street.’

Laidler was right and the party was wrong—but any rebel whose pulse still beat felt the nobility in that column of socialists, doggedly marching on as the police batons rained down upon them.

In such a time, in such a struggle, Guido chose, like Mordecaius, to go down the long slope. He submitted to the party the requisite letter of self-criticism, which the Workers’ Weekly ran over two pages, a testament to the importance it accorded him. He was popular, respected and well known, both inside and outside the CPA, and the question of his relationship to the party clearly mattered.

Yet the central committee found Guido’s self-criticism inadequate, a decision it explained at length in the following week’s edition. The document, the leadership explained, was welcome as a ‘preliminary step’ towards correcting Guido’s ‘theoretical bankruptcy and rank opportunism’. But he had minimised his real misdeed: his attempt ‘to behead the working class’ by destroying the party. After he left the CPA, he had ‘entered the ranks of reformism as a left-winger, a “Marxist”, and … remained there while the leaders developed into social fascists [and] he became a social fascist’. Despite his connections with the ALP, there was ‘not the slightest appreciation of the role of left social fascism in the statement’. The party sternly instructed him to devote himself to studying the Comintern’s recent pronouncements before making another application—though it did reassure him that future statements would be met with ‘comradely consideration’.

The real message in the CC’s response was plain: Guido had not abased himself sufficiently. His application acknowledged serious errors but its chatty, chirpy style read quite unlike the broken tracts produced by most former leaders. Hence the need for a further statement, one in which the penitent definitively acknowledged his own status as a ‘left social fascist’.
Guido, however, had quite different plans.
Russia

‘There aren’t any happy endings here’

You are a faun:
slant-eyed remote;
you are conscious of nothing
but the dark lost life of your trees.
Your tight red mouth
cannot cry out in tongues,
in the tongues of the wood,
so that you smile at even me,
a little furtively.

Alwyn Lee’s poem appeared in the first edition of *Stream*. Almost certainly, the woman he addressed was Neura. Her almond eyes were, she said, a gift from a Mongol ancestor, and their exotic slant compelled the artists amongst the Baracchis’ friends to document her eerie beauty. Napier Waller made her the central sylph in his mural for the T&G building on Collins Street; Abe Newmark used her as a model for his sculptures.

Lee was not the only one infatuated with Neura. Would-be bohemians at the Shop prized an invitation to a Baracchi party as a ticket into adult sophistication, since at Larnoo stuffy conformity fell away, while alcohol and conversation flowed. Before the dawn broke, many a youthful reveller fancied himself in love with his hostess.

Guido seems to have known (and accepted) that Neura’s art lessons with Newmark had developed into a casual affair in the secluded Fairfield studio. But her decision, in mid-1932, to elope with Alwyn Lee was much more serious. He was not yet twenty-one: a poet, a communist and a libertine. ‘I think him the finest boy I have ever met,’ Guido told Nettie, as he sent Alwyn with Neura off to a Palmer soirée in October 1931. Lee was remarkably good-looking—a fallen angel, quipped one of his contemporaries—and his addiction to risky romances had already put his name on the lips of a wronged husband in the divorce court.

Witty, provocative, irresponsible: in many ways, Alwyn Lee was a younger Guido Baracchi.
Still, Neura may have thought less of his charms had her husband’s failings not been, at that moment, so manifest. Guido, too, had been conducting an affair, with an undergraduate called Isobel Renfree—a woman on the fringes of the Stream group, young enough to be his daughter. So when Alwyn approached Neura, there was nothing to prevent her running to his arms. They made love after one of the Larnoo parties and then fled together into the countryside.

Again, Guido made no protest. He was never the kind of Lothario who distinguished between the sexual freedom he enjoyed and the loyalty due from his women, and he responded to the liaison between his wife and his friend with remarkable equanimity. Christening Alwyn ‘Endymion’, after the beautiful shepherd who fell in love with the moon goddess, he sent the pair money for a trip to Sydney, with his wishes for every happiness together.

Their passion, perhaps predictably, soon burned itself out—or at least it did on Neura’s side. Alwyn remained in love with Neura for years; she wearied of Alwyn after a few weeks in which his precocity palled, and his youth grew more obvious and tiresome. Infatuation turned to indifference, indifference to antipathy, and when Guido contacted her in Sydney with the news that Jack, one of her beloved dogs, had died, she told him she wanted to come home.

Guido, too, had cooled of his liaison with Isobel, probably for similar reasons, and would have gladly welcomed Neura back to Larnoo. But there was a problem. Isobel, he explained, was pregnant.

The news struck Neura hard. Her longing for a baby had been only temporarily assuaged by their mock parenting of Jack Kavanagh’s boy. Doctors had since advised her she could never bear a child, and that Guido’s casual affair had produced a baby seemed terribly unfair.

They tried to sort out the mess as best they could. Neura declared herself unwilling, no matter what she felt for Guido, to remain in Melbourne with Isobel’s baby on the way. She would rather, she said, go overseas. Surrounded by painters, she’d been developing her own talents for the past years, creating bas-reliefs under Abe Newmark’s tuition and supplying the FOSU fairs with knick-knacks and handicrafts. If she went abroad, she could continue to formally study the art she loved.

For Guido, too, travel seemed ideal. He’d always wanted to see the Soviet Union for himself, to experience the bubbling social laboratory where theory transmuted to fact. The consolidation of the Stalin regime had made foreign travel more feasible: earlier that year, Itzhak Gust had led a FOSU delegation to Russia. Unlike most of the comrades, Guido, of course, possessed the means to make his own way. Rather than re-approach the Australian party, with all the humiliations that entailed, he could go to the Soviet Union and experience
the communist transformation first-hand. As he knew from his time in Germany, service with the international movement counted heavily amongst the local leadership. If he were approved by the Soviets, the *Workers’ Weekly* would accept him, too.

That, then, was the plan. Neura would sail to London and wait there while Guido made arrangements for his new child and its mother. He would meet Neura in England; together they would brave the hazardous journey to Russia.

By the time Neura left for England, relations between her and Guido were, it seemed, perfectly restored. After her departure, he told RH Long of his ‘desolation’ at waving her goodbye. ‘I envy her very much, I do wish I could have gone with her but, alas, that is impossible just at present.’

The impediment, of course, was Isobel. She’d thrown herself enthusiastically into the libertarianism of the *Stream* crowd, and welcomed the arrival of baby Ysobel with a resolute indifference to conventional opinion. Yet she probably hadn’t realised the difficulties in store as the birth heralded the end of her studies and even many of the supposed progressives in the Labour Club sniffed their disapproval of an unwed mother. Though she called herself ‘Mrs Barker’, the name provided thin camouflage. To the world, she was transparently unmarried and her baby illegitimate, at a time when such distinctions mattered tremendously, even amongst the radical intelligentsia.

And, besides, she still loved Guido.

To him, the affair meant little but he did, at least, provide a small income and a paid nurse. Seeking advice on the latter, he approached Lil Jorgensen, the wife of the painter Justus, and a woman regarded—in Meldrumite circles, at least—as an authority on childcare. The conversation drew him closer to the Jorgensen crowd, and when Max Meldrum, Jorgensen’s original guru, celebrated his birthday in January 1933, Guido attended the party out in the Dandenongs. One of the few people he knew in the crush was Betty Davies and they naturally spent the lunch talking.

Betty nursed her own worries, and her appreciation for his sympathetic ear overcame her earlier disappointment about finding the notorious Baracchi mild and Australian rather than dashing and Italian. Betty had, at a young age, married Ellis Davies, a successful businessman twenty years her senior, but wearied of his aesthetic and political conservatism as she became more acquainted with the breezy ways of the Meldrumites. Peter, their disabled son, had just died and Betty knew, with sudden certainty, that she would leave her husband. But she hesitated about how to do it, for Ellis was powerful and determined and she would never feel free while they lived in the same country.

She told Guido only that she was travelling to London. He asked her the ship she sailed on and laughed when she told him. They were booked on the same vessel. Emboldened by the
coincidence, she explained her circumstances: the misery of the marriage, the tragedy of her son’s death, the difficulty of obtaining a passport without Davies’ permission. Fleeing to England terrified her, and the discovery of a friendly presence on the ship eased her mind considerably.

Besides, Guido was such a sensitive listener. By the end of the lunch, she wondered if she was in love, and she gladly agreed to see him again and again over the following days. With both preoccupied with escape, the hint of fresh romance tasted irresistibly of freedom, despite the new tangles it promised, and they spent the next weeks together. Betty knew of Neura and Isobel—everyone, it seemed, in Meldrumite circles did—and she recognised, at one level, that Guido scarcely offered the most stable of refuges. But she desperately needed an ally. A few days after the lunch, a quarrel with Davies brought on an unexpected showdown. Her resentment and anger boiled over and she taunted her husband with the truth. She was leaving him. Her berth was booked. There was nothing he could do to stop her.

Unwilling to spend another odious moment in Davies’ company, she called Guido. He, as understanding as ever, picked her up and took her to a hotel. She soon rented a temporary apartment where she and Guido slept together for the first time.

Betty was talented and ambitious, strong-willed and pretty, and Guido was, already, far more drawn to her than he had ever been to Isobel. They had been booked on the same ship; quickly they acknowledged that they were travelling as a couple and, then, that they were going to the same place. A Russian émigré had once told Betty of Stanislavsky’s experiments with theatre in the Soviet Union, and since then she’d always imagined Moscow as the acme of cultural sophistication. She seized the chance of accompanying Guido to the Soviet Union—and not just because she couldn’t imagine anywhere further from her husband.

Of course, a new relationship, whatever its immediate comforts, created for Guido another utterly impossible situation, more fraught even than his long-ago flight from Toby. Neura awaited in England, where he would arrive in the company of another lover, a development that threatened both his original travel plans and, presumably, his marriage.

Guido was, however, comparatively inured to crisis, and the slow-building havoc he’d set in motion worried others more than it did him. It spurred, for instance, Alwyn Lee to leave the bush hut in which he’d been tending his broken heart so he could plead with Guido to stay with Neura. If he couldn’t have her, Alwyn wanted only happiness for Neura and that, clearly, depended on Guido. He accordingly made clear his disapproval of the interloper Betty, who was in turn rather taken aback at the ‘exceptionally beautiful young man’ who sat at the far end of the table in the Latin, ‘staring at me with angry and resentful eyes’.

Despite Alwyn’s anger, Guido remained as paternally fond of his prodigy as ever. For Lee’s twenty-first birthday, he presented Alwyn with his own three battered volumes of *Capital* and a bottle of thirty-year-old Tokay to add a celebratory touch otherwise lacking in
several thousand pages of Marxist economics. His genuine affection did not, however, induce Guido to pay attention to Alwyn’s remonstrances, nor change in the slightest his decisions about Neura, Betty and the course of his romantic life.

In fact, he spent most of the time before his departure with Betty (whom he called ‘Betsy’ or ‘Betsy Jane’). They journeyed together to her old family home near Nagambie in the Goulburn Valley and ate dinner in a shabby Greek café, where their presence attracted the attention of the bored local youths. The obviously romantic dinner provoked catcalls and whistles until Guido, as unruffled as ever, took out a book from his coat, cleared his throat and recited the Langston Hughes poem ‘Mulatto’.

‘I am your son, white man,’ he began and read on to Hughes’ chorus. ‘A nigger night,’ he recited, ‘A nigger joy./A little yellow/Bastard boy.’

The astonished teenagers fell into a stunned silence, and one of them grudgingly acknowledged, ‘You’re not half bad, mister.’

It was a bravura performance, quelling the hecklers with a Negro communist’s sexually charged poem about miscegenation. Later that evening Guido stripped naked and swam in the darkness across the broad lake, in a mock-heroic display of love: an impulsive, crazy gesture of a sort that Betty’s husband would never have performed, and one that therefore embodied everything that made Guido fascinating to her.

Betty, too, was taking an audacious plunge, abandoning her marriage for a revolutionary of Italian origin and Catholic background who would transport her to Soviet Russia at a time when respectable Australians regarded the country more or less as a citadel of evil. And then, of course, there was Guido’s notorious character. As Betty’s sensible friend Zelie pointed out, ‘He has already ditched three women. Aren’t you taking a risk?’

The question weighed even more heavily when Guido ushered Betty into the little house in Collingwood where baby Yo lay under the care of her nurse. Isobel wasn’t present then, but she arrived like a ghastly visitation from the future at the farewell dinner the Meldrumites threw for Betty and Guido at the Latin. Guido remained entirely unruffled, smiling at Isobel as benignly as at everyone else, but Betty found her company altogether disquieting. When their ship left the wharf at Port Melbourne, Betty looked down at the crowd, where Jorgensen and his coterie had gathered, only to see Isobel there, too, tears streaming down her dead white face.

Guido had originally booked to travel with Bertram Higgins, with whom he still shared a cabin. ‘No doubt,’ sniffed Betty, ‘[they] had anticipated long discussions on all manner of esoteric subjects to relieve the tedium of the voyage.’ But if, as she suspected, Higgins resented her presence, he was too well bred to display his annoyance. He seemed, in any case, happy enough working on his poetry, reading Ezra Pound and TS Eliot in a deckchair, and absentmindedly trying to seduce a young woman sailing off to Colombo to meet her fiancé.
Guido, meanwhile, subjected Betty to an intensive course in radical doctrine. For him, Marxism was the finest gift he could offer his new partner: a revelation of the world’s true character, and an opportunity to understand the distinctive future that Moscow represented. For Betty, on the other hand, the discussions provided a primer in the mysterious vocabulary of her lover, a language she sought to master as much to read his complicated personality as to prepare for their journey. In a secluded corner of the deck, they huddled over revolutionary texts, the books’ covers cunningly disguised from bourgeois onlookers, so that passengers taking an evening constitutional saw only two lovebirds reading from a volume entitled *Meditations on Violets* and walked on without suspecting they’d witnessed a study group of the syndicalist classic *Reflections on Violence*.

Betty’s underlying uncertainty about her position in Guido’s universe didn’t ease when they berthed in Fremantle and, along with Bertram, visited Katharine Susannah Prichard at her home in the hills near Perth. Despite her own literary accomplishments, Betty found the novelist’s fame, Higgins’ Oxford education and Guido’s Marxist erudition equally intimidating, and she sat silent while the learned conversation sparkled around her. At the other end of the table, a sullen Hugo Throssell—a hero in a bayonet charge, but out of his depth with communism and hopelessly lost in literature—pointedly talked of ‘my wife’ to signal that Guido’s youthful dalliance with Katharine remained unforgiven.

The awkwardness in the Prichard household paled beside the uncertainty of London, where Neura—her beautiful presence looming larger with each passing day—awaited their arrival. Or rather, she awaited Guido’s arrival, for she still knew nothing whatsoever of Betty. Each time the ship docked, the envelopes waited. ‘All, all, all my love’, Neura wrote, and Guido read each letter through, put it into his pocket and lapsed into a brooding silence. They had agreed to get off the ship at Plymouth and catch a train to London, earlier than expected so that Guido could talk to Neura in private, rather than breaking the news of Betty on the wharf. But while he could control the circumstances of their encounter, nothing he could do could alter its nature.

They arrived in Britain at the end of March. The next morning, Guido left the hotel to face Neura. He didn’t return until the early hours of the morning and, when he unlocked the door, he said nothing but climbed into bed in evident distress and went to sleep. In the morning, he wordlessly handed Betty a book. An inscription in the flyleaf read: ‘To Betty, with comradely good wishes for every happiness and success in the USSR. Neura.’

Betty, utterly astonished, attributed the generosity of her rival to communism, the doctrines of which remained for her, despite their shipboard sessions, rather hazy. Certainly, Neura accepted, just as Guido and many (though not all) communists did, that relationships should rest on choice rather than compulsion and so could be dissolved as easily as they were
sealed. But if Neura could accept Guido’s cruel caprices more easily than, say, Lesbia, it wasn’t entirely from philosophical principle, but also because her politics complemented a sexual and emotional independence that Lesbia quite lacked. She knew she couldn’t change Guido’s mind; she wouldn’t demean herself by trying.

Besides, she’d been enjoying an affair of her own, a relationship about which, at that stage, she told Guido nothing. Her liaison with Michael Hall, a tall and elegant Canadian artist (Betty later decided he could have been the governor’s aide-de-camp or a fashion model) had been more or less a casual fling—but when she decided to return to Australia, Hall joined her at Plymouth.

The discussion with Neura left Guido shaken and sullen for several days, and continuing uncertainty over his papers didn’t help his mood. Canberra refused to provide the necessary authorisation for travel to Russia, forcing Guido each day to stomp back and forth from Australia House to the cheap flat in which they stayed. He’d explained to the CPA his Russian plans and received from the local leadership a secret communiqué to deliver to Moscow—a clear token of his rise in the party’s eyes. Now he reacquainted himself with Pollitt and Palme Dutt and the other British party leaders who, though nonplussed to find him beside the middle-class Betty instead of the proletarian Neura, tried their best to expedite the trip.

Eventually, though, even they admitted defeat. Guido would simply take his chances without papers.

The *Felix Dzerzhinsky* steamed out of London on 24 April and the further it sailed from England, the more Guido’s worries seemed to peel away, until Betty thought he looked years younger. As in the past, a ship was transporting him away from his troubles, putting thousands of miles of ocean between him and Neura and Isobel and Ellis. This time, it was a journey not just away from yesterday but into tomorrow, an expedition to a land in which his personal happiness would melt into the collective exultation of a liberated proletariat. As they entered open waters, Guido began to sing, ‘prancing up and down the cabin in a delirium of joy’. Betty joined him and they cavorted together until they lost their balance with the swell and fell together into one of the narrow bunks.

Their little ship further spurred their enthusiasm, since it carried the name of the Soviet commissar selected by Lenin to stamp out counter-revolutionaries, and it waved on its prow the hammer and sickle flag under which rebels in Australia faced the truncheon and the prison cell. Its passengers saluted each other with a clenched fist and the officers and crew mingled in unselﬁsh-conscious camaraderie, as if they already abided upon a floating outpost of socialism. Theirs was a journey not to a place but to no place—in Greek, Utopia—and, at the ﬁrst sight of the Soviet coast, the travellers burst into song. The workmen at the Leningrad docks joined
in the chorus and, with the massed voices from many lands ringing in their ears, the passengers entered the Soviet Union in a state of almost religious excitement.

Their arrival in Moscow, after a train from Leningrad, fortuitously coincided with the May Day celebrations in Red Square, an occasion marked by spectacular pageantry. The guides from Intourist (the Soviet travel agency) ushered Guido and Betty to a vantage point where they could watch with suitable awe the columns of tanks, armoured cars, artillery and soldiers trundling past Stalin, while the maximum leader remained at attention, taking the salute for hours on end.

In a different context, a parade of the machinery of state violence might have seemed a curious celebration of socialist priorities. But this was 1933 and, during their voyage to the Soviet Union, Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany. With the fascist armies openly preparing for a cataclysmic war against Judaic Bolshevism, the Soviet Union’s readiness to fight provided reassurance rather than alarm: if Reaction had established its capital in Berlin, it seemed to Guido and Betty only sensible that Moscow would arm itself for Progress. The social content of the weaponry before them revealed itself in the people who followed the tanks and trucks—ordinary Russians who marched, not in the drilled columns of the soldiers, but in a jubilant, disorderly throng, cavorting and singing and dragging effigies and colourful floats.

Guido and Betty had arrived in Moscow in the midst of what became known as Hungry Thirty-Three, a year in which the Russian peasants suffered a cataclysmic decline in living standards almost unparalleled in human history. Yet, for all the barbarism the regime had unleashed in the countryside and against its political opponents, it enjoyed a certain popularity amongst young people in the cities, who celebrated Stalinist attempts to transform and modernise backward Russia. The enthusiasm of the May Day rally was probably genuine, and foreigners could not immediately understand that the good cheer of the young comrades marching en masse did not represent the sentiments of the populace as a whole.

Besides, Guido might have been seeking Utopia but he did not expect perfection. The British comrades had already warned of the shortages in the Soviet Union, and advised Guido and Betty to proffer parcels of unobtainable luxuries like chocolates, cigarettes and coffee as gifts to Russian friends. After Guido delivered his mysterious message from the Australian party, they set about distributing their largesse. In the process, they met Freda Utley, an English communist and writer, whom they befriended at once. ‘Bustling, untidy, flustered,’ wrote Betty. ‘Wisps of hair about her face, stockings wrinkled round her ankles, but with the warmest, gayest smile imaginable and a pair of alert intelligent eyes in an otherwise plain face.’

Freda came from an impeccable socialist background—her father had known Engels and William Morris personally—and she’d left behind an academic career to travel to the Soviet
Union where she’d married a Russian, Arcadi Berdievsky. With one well-received book behind her and another on its way, she worked at the Institute of World Economy and Politics. She later claimed that, by 1933, she was already disgusted at the hypocrisy of the inner circle of the Soviet Union, whom she described as a ‘privileged aristocracy’ as isolated from the masses as the ancien régime in France. Yet she spoke nothing of her disenchantment then, and Guido and Betty sensed only a vague cynicism when she explained, drawing hungrily on a foreign cigarette, how matters stood.

They wanted to stay longer than their tourist visa allowed? No problem. So long as they possessed foreign currency, any obstacles could be negotiated. But they should find work, which would provide them with a ration card and a room in which to live. When they protested that their documentation ruled out employment, she gave them the slightly weary smile of experience.

‘You’d be amazed at what can be done even here,’ she said, ‘if you go the right way about it.’

She proved, of course, perfectly correct.

Betty, adopting, Russian-style, her father’s given name ‘Roland’, almost immediately landed a position as a journalist with the English-language paper produced for foreign communists in the USSR, the Moscow Daily News, while Guido applied to work as an English-German translator for the Co-operative Publishing Society for Foreign Workers, the publishing house responsible for books aimed at an international market. His job entitled them to a room of their own, a prospect that excited them greatly—until they actually visited the ruined villa that contained it. The place stank, it was overcrowded and dirty, and their kitchen consisted only of a sink, a leaky faucet and two dubious kerosene stoves on an overturned packing case.

It was good for Moscow, their guide told them. At least they didn’t have to share with another family.

Guido refused to allow their insalubrious accommodation to dampen his enthusiasm. He’d anticipated discomfort and he almost revelled in having found it. He was, after all, a bourgeois sojourning in the land of the workers, and the worse things were for a man like him, the more socialism seemed ensconced in the driver’s seat. Besides, at the Co-op Pub, he’d been selected to translate Marx from German to English. In Australia, the censor prohibited revolutionary literature; here in Russia, the government employed him to produce it. Guido threw himself into the task, carrying his dictionaries home and labouring into the night.

‘I think that he has never been so happy in his life,’ wrote Betty in her diary, ‘not because of me of course, but because he is now a rabotnik, a genuine worker helping to build the new
society. Guido, who has never had to work in his whole life, now slaves for fifteen hours a day and loves it. He hurries off to work each morning, his heavy dictionaries under his arm, toils up the hill, arrives at the office out of breath and red-faced, and is completely satisfied with life.’

His schedule made it even harder to see what normality meant for the Russian people outside the privileged enclave of foreigners. At the Moscow Daily News, where Betty worked, the staff mostly consisted of English and American communists, all to a greater or lesser extent estranged from the society they’d come to serve. Rose Cohen, the British woman with whom both Hig and Harry Pollitt had fallen in love, was here, married to an important Comintern official, working as foreign editor on the paper, and living in a neatly furnished apartment. Rose and her husband holidayed in Georgia, where many peasants were dying of famine, but she remained grotesquely ignorant of what was happening around her. ‘We nearly died of Georgian hospitality,’ she wrote to her sister. ‘A real Georgian dinner begins at five and goes on till about midnight. We had two such dinners in Tiflis and one in Batoum.’

Betty also met Anna Louise Strong, the American journalist Guido had known in his Berlin days. Back then, Strong had fancied herself in love with Trotsky, but she’d accepted his downfall and the murderous campaign picking off his supporters with remarkable equanimity, and she now lauded Stalin with an equal enthusiasm. In her books, she extolled the levelling achievements of socialism; in real life, she claimed a car and any other special privileges that came her way. She was, thought Betty, ‘the very pattern of a bitch’: when Betty and Guido used their tourist tickets at a theatre party, they were astonished to find her gorging herself at the refreshments table during the interval, before, when the bell rang, filling her purse with chocolates to enjoy back in her seat.

Not everyone stayed hungry in Hungry Thirty-Three.

Where Berlin in the twenties had drawn visiting radicals into a struggle, Moscow in the thirties drew them into a regime, a quite different matter. In Russia, their communism manifested itself not in the organisation of protest or strikes but through employment within the bureaucracy. They lived in special accommodation, they drew extra rations, and they talked almost exclusively with other foreigners, all of whom upheld Stalin’s general line against Trotsky and other critics. Their preoccupations were world politics and the internal machinations of their own parties; they knew more about Hitlerism and the British hunger marches than about ordinary Russians, whom they were more likely to encounter in Lenin’s texts than in their day-to-day activities.

While they couldn’t entirely avoid glimpses of distant brutality, they perfected a blindness to its import. Just as patients who secretly suspect cancer might prolong their
ignorance by avoiding the doctor, the Moscow expatriates allowed their eyes to slide uneasily past anything that might unsettle their idyll.

The technique was easy enough to master. In the streets, beggars held out wraith-thin hands when they saw Guido. ‘Uncle, uncle, bread,’ they wailed. It was distressing to walk by them, just as it was disconcerting to find prostitutes congregating in the hotel foyers. But, Guido told himself, a new civilisation necessarily inherited baggage from the past, and, with the USSR painting the future with such broad brushstrokes, carping about the problems that remained unsolved rather than celebrating the transformation so clearly underway seemed unspeakably petty.

When Freda, briefly visiting England, offered them use of her apartment, she wanted the rent paid in foreign currency—a stipulation that revealed the grey economy of barter and nepotism, so important to everyday survival in Moscow. Yet this, too, was merely part of the transition, a vestigial remnant of the free market that would wither and atrophy as Russia built.

And no one could deny that Russia was building. In the most backward nation in Europe, auto plants, blast furnaces, tractor factories and hydroelectric schemes sprang up like mushrooms. Entire new cities emerged from the tundra, and electric powerlines snaked across vast stretches of the earth, while dirigibles and aeroplanes soared overhead. Everything new, everything modern, everything of giant size and breathtaking ambition, as the future took shape in concrete and steel. Even Betty couldn’t help but contrast the hopelessness and despair of a Melbourne sunk in the Depression with the confidence and energy of a Moscow awash with plans.

Unemployment in the West stripped men of dignity, but socialist construction created new heroes, from the Soviet polar explorers conquering the icy wastes, to the socialist aviators climbing into the sky and the engineers doubling and tripling their production quotas. The children begging and the women selling themselves might have suggested that the new world had not been altogether reached, but the breakneck speed with which the Russians were chasing it seemed undeniable, confirmed all around by daily life.

Betty, unconstrained by ideology, could respond more instinctively than Guido. In Leningrad, they’d toured the special shops crammed with jewels and antique relics sold incredibly cheaply by desperate members of the old aristocracy. She’d stared at them enviously, he with disapproval. Guido insisted they eat only the grim food to which their ration books entitled them; she occasionally sneaked into the foreign currency shop to sample more tempting fare. ‘I knew him well enough,’ she wrote, ‘to realise that, however bad things were, he was prepared to accept the conditions that prevailed in this new society for which he had fought and dreamed so long.’
Still, whatever the discomforts, Soviet life was never dull—and the Bolshoi Theatre surpassed all Betty’s expectations. ‘Opera and ballet such as I had never dreamt of,’ she said later. ‘It’s seldom things exceed your dreams, well, this absolutely did.’

Her disillusionment, when it came, pertained not to Russia, but to Guido. One day, about two months into their visit, she was mending some clothes when she found a letter in his pocket. It was addressed to Neura and, though it was only half-completed, he’d composed enough to reveal his ongoing love. ‘I will be with you, darling,’ he’d written, ‘just as soon as I humanly can.’

What was he thinking? Perhaps the adventure in Moscow had recalled the adventure in Berlin, so that he contrasted Neura’s political experience with Betty’s relative naïvety. Maybe the pace of Soviet life had created a nostalgia for the relative stability of his marriage, as the novelty of the new relationship waned. Either way, when he returned from work, he knew from Betty’s face what she had found, and he sat beside her on the bed and held her hand.

‘I’m sorry, Betsy dear,’ he said. ‘Truly I am sorry.’

Once again, he could infuse his apology with a genuine anguish, for he experienced both the birth and the death of love as forces overwhelming him from without, almost as if he and Betty together had fallen victim to a natural catastrophe like an earthquake or a flood. Yet his unfeigned sympathy provided scant consolation for Betty, whose life, thousands of miles away from anyone she knew, had fallen suddenly into pieces before her.

Even as she grappled with her abandonment, the day’s mail arrived. It contained a fresh letter from Neura. Guido read it and silently showed it to the still weeping Betty. The letter was dated weeks earlier and, in it, Neura explained that Mike Hall, who had travelled with her to Australia, had asked her to marry him, an offer she thought she would accept.

They remained in Moscow, in the cramped room, and the memory of Guido’s betrayal lay between them.

A few weeks later, Katharine Prichard arrived at the Co-op Pub office, and Betty, despite having only met her for that one tense luncheon, fell into her arms. Katharine had been in Europe, staying with her sister and meeting her publishers. A visit to the Soviet Union offered both an adventure and, given its rarity, irresistible material for a book. She was lodged in the Hotel Lux, the customary residence for high-ranking communists. She found it crowded and expensive, and gladly accepted when Guido and Betty offered her space in their already cramped quarters. A reminder of the world beyond their narrow horizons, her presence helped to defuse some of the tension in the room.

‘Katharine sleeps in a corner of the room,’ wrote Betty, ‘while Guido and I share the bed. A strange ménage à trois. I hope she is not aware that the situation acts like an aphrodisiac on Guido … I trust she is sound asleep by the time he closes [his books] and comes to bed.’
The authorities naturally provided every consideration for their famous visiting novelist, ushering Katharine into the presence of Soviet dignitaries and touring her through the city’s most impressive sites. ‘She is tremulous with happiness,’ noted Betty, who had warmed considerably to their guest. But she also recorded Katharine’s unease about the cynicism and greed of the bureaucrats who fawned on her—stories that Prichard repeated in a hushed and wondering tone. The barely disguised venality of senior Soviet officials suggested deeper eddies and undertows beneath the dark ocean of the Soviet party—but before they could explore them together, Katharine was bundled off on a writers’ delegation to Siberia and the Co-op Pub asked Guido and Betty to transfer to its newly formed Leningrad section.

They agreed at once. The move would solve the housing problem facing them when the now pregnant Freda returned to reclaim her apartment, while allowing them to see some of the country outside Moscow.

Leningrad provided its own harsh revelations. The authorities, with an increasingly familiar incompetence, failed to deliver the accommodation they’d promised, leaving Guido and Betty stuck first in a hotel and then a temporary room in an old monastery: a run-down warren, sheltering several hundred people in grubby and cramped cells. They were given a mattress made of straw, a table, a wardrobe and two chairs and, for cooking, two saucepans, a kettle and a Primus stove.

Worst of all was the bathroom. ‘While we have “enjoyed” sewerage of a somewhat ineffective kind the worst privation has been an almost total lack of toilet paper,’ wrote Betty, ‘which is distressing enough under even the best conditions, but when it is combined with an almost universal looseness of the bowels, the results are best left undescribed. Sufficient to say that what an enterprising Russian can do with excreta amounts to something close to genius, and the décor on some of the walls and even ceilings I have witnessed passes all description.’

Guido remained determined to make the best of everything, but maintaining ignorance as to the system’s failings proved harder and harder. The Russians they encountered were uniformly hungry, pathetically grateful for gifts of eggs or flour. Guido later recorded a joke from the time, in which two men discuss the ever-present shortages.

‘My meat ration has been cut again,’ said one to the other. ‘My butter ration, my milk ration, my egg ration, and my bread ration likewise. I can’t buy a raincoat at my cooperative and they’re short of all manner of household articles. Things were bad enough last year but they’re getting worse and worse. If they don’t improve next year, I’ll drown myself in the river.’

‘Better do it now, comrade,’ his friend replied. ‘They’ll be short of the water in the river next year.’
He must have also heard—but dared not repeat—the much more bitter jokes emanating from the countryside. Freda, for instance, recorded a story about a party propagandist explaining to a peasant village the achievements of the regime. One of the peasants responds: ‘Yes, comrade, it sounds wonderful, but look at our clothing—nothing but rags to wear and nothing to be bought in the village shop.’

The communist answers: ‘Why are you so fussed about clothes? In Africa and the South Seas, the people have no clothes at all.’

The peasant scratches his head and says thoughtfully: ‘I suppose they’ve had socialism for a long time there.’

Even Katharine Prichard, surrounded by sycophants, could not help but recognise the venality of many so-called Friends of the Soviet Union, radical tourists who revelled in their little privileges while the ordinary Russians starved. She passed through Leningrad before taking the Felix Dzerzhinsky back to London, and Betty and Guido were shocked by how much she’d changed. ‘She was sadly disillusioned,’ Betty wrote. ‘None of her former optimism remained. During the weeks spent here she had seen so much and learnt so much that she had never dreamt of, and her heart was sick.’

Katharine left on 8 November. Two or so weeks later, they received a disjointed, almost incoherent, note. Hugo Throssell was dead. He had shot himself while Katherine was still overseas, despairing at the failure of his financial schemes. Katharine’s note concluded, ‘I did not know I cared so much,’ and it’s possible that his suicide, at the end of her Soviet expedition, left her too emotionally raw to cope with political disillusionment, and so nipped in the bud her nascent awareness of the truth about the USSR.

Katharine’s departure left Betty and Guido, somewhat demoralised, alone in Leningrad. But shared hardship did much to knit their fractured relationship together. They finally received the promised apartment, Guido thrived as a translator, and they managed a two-week holiday in the midst of the ferocious winter, where even the discovery of an OGPU prison farm on the outskirts of Leningrad couldn’t dampen their pleasure in the countryside. Betty revelled in the Soviet Union’s extraordinary theatre, astonished and delighted when the director of the Pushkin Theatre showed interest in staging The Touch of Silk.

Even as she savoured the honour, fresh disaster arrived when thieves burgled the flat and made off with all their possessions. The value of the stolen goods mattered much less than the loss of warm clothes and solid boots, entirely unobtainable in Leningrad. The most obvious answer was a return to London, where they could replenish their supplies from the surplus luggage they’d left behind. Guido, still labouring on his translations, could not go and so, in February 1934, Betty set out alone by train to England.
As the carriage left the station, Guido slipped into her hand a piece of paper containing only four words: ‘Darling, I adore you.’ The message restored her heart; the brief experience of Western prosperity, with its fresh bread rolls and properly brewed coffee, restored her body. In London, she bought the necessary clothes, received her mail and prepared to return to the Soviet Union—only to find Intourist reluctant to grant her the necessary papers. After all, she’d entered the country on a tourist visa and stayed for nearly a year. Why should they trust her again?

Even a fresh communication from Guido (‘I have you in my heart every waking moment and long for your return’) could not quell her mounting unease. Betty turned to Harry Pollitt who, with the assistance of the Soviet embassy, resolved the problem. But there was a catch. Pollitt wanted a favour. She was going back to Moscow, through Germany. She looked harmless and middle-class. The Nazis would never suspect her. Could she deliver a document for the party?

Determined to disprove the implied slur in his assessment, she accepted the mission. As it happened, Pollitt was right. Nazi customs officers rummaged through her luggage but, after an agonising few minutes, they let her pass unscathed.

The adventure—or at least, her willingness to undertake it—revealed Betty’s new attachment to the Soviet Union and the communist project. Neither she nor Guido could deny the problems in Russia, but if the obstacles to socialist construction had proven greater than anticipated, all the more reason to dedicate oneself to the task. However flawed, the Soviet Union still offered an alternative to capitalism with its unemployment and war: a new civilisation rising, even as the old one fell. On that basis, they forgave everything. On that basis, they could not stand aside.

‘It was an exhilarating moment,’ Betty wrote as, back in Moscow, they marched in the 1934 May Day parade, carrying their banners into Red Square. ‘Not even the most hardened sceptic would remain unmoved at the shouts of triumph from ten thousand throats, the clenched fists raised in the traditional red salute, the air of exultation.’

The excitement, the sense of belonging to a radiant future triumphing over the stagnant past, remained, even though Freda had explained why the Moscow streets seemed so orderly in the weeks prior to May. Foreign tourists arriving for the festivities encountered none of the usual pitiable beggars, not because, as Betty innocently suggested, living standards had risen, but rather because soldiers had rounded up the homeless, loaded them onto trucks and dumped them sixty kilometres away in the frozen countryside, where they would starve to death without their agonies distressing the dignitaries.

‘There aren’t,’ said Freda, ‘any happy endings here.’

It was a warning that none of them, not even Freda herself, took seriously enough. In one section of their minds, they understood the wrongness, not even the evil, of events transpiring
around them. But they smothered despairing thoughts in their infancy. They believed in the Plan, with its blueprints, its technicians and its construction targets, and they knew it would banish homelessness. That fierce knowledge kept them from focusing on the miserable wretches shivering in the cold here and now, as they bleached unpleasant facts of their ugliness with the antiseptic abstractions that saturated all that they saw. Russia was science and reason and progress; the German Nazis revealed the true face of capital, with avowed irrationalism and naked violence. The Soviet Union hurtled forward like a locomotive, even as Europe and Australia fell behind, and if mistakes were made and errors committed, these were a tragic but inevitable result of the project’s audacity. You can’t, Guido and Betty reassured themselves, with an adage greatly employed during the thirties, make an omelette without a few broken eggs.

At the same time, they wanted to go home. They had already stayed far longer than they anticipated and wanted to get back to Australia. Yet, when they mentioned this to the authorities, the displeasure was obvious. Though Guido had finished his translations, the authorities procrastinated about supplying the permission to leave. Why didn’t he stay? they asked. There was much work to do; a man like him could play an important role in the construction of communism. If he and Betty renounced their Australian citizenship, the Soviet Union would be only too happy to call them its own.

But Freda had always insisted they should never give up their passports and so Guido politely declined the offer, remaining adamant in the face of bureaucratic displeasure, until at last the commissars relented. Because he’d lacked authorisation to enter the Soviet Union, he needed to cover his tracks with a complicated journey back to Britain. He and Betty pored over maps and argued about possibilities and eventually decided to travel a winding path by way of the Black Sea: an itinerary that gave Betty the pleasure of seeing the Aegean and the Mediterranean seas, and Guido the satisfaction of fooling the capitalists.

Illegal it might have been, but their convoluted journey out of Russia was scarcely unpleasant; indeed, its meander through the provinces featured in Intourist’s brochures as its Grand Tour, the best package the Soviet Union’s fledgling tourist industry could offer. In mid-May 1934, Freda and Arcadi and their little son Jon waved them goodbye as they set off for Gorky. An emotional Freda put her arm around Betty just before they left.

‘Take care of her,’ she said to Guido. ‘Don’t let the party rub the bloom off her. They will, you know.’

Her warning, so ominous as a farewell, recognised both the corrosive effect of the Communist Party and the inevitability of Betty joining it—a shrewd assessment of the contradictions of their Russian experience.

The final journey took them through rural areas where the famine raged worst, but they were tourists, and the difference between their lives and those of the people around them
could not have been greater. The boat that ushered them down the Volga provided a pleasant cabin with soft bunks and running water. In its wake, it towed a barge filled with starving peasants, the detritus of Stalin’s homicidal agricultural policies. The forcible imposition of collectivisation had decimated the countryside, with machine-gun toting commissars requisitioning for the cities the little food available until, in the remote villages, the bellies of the children bloated and their limbs wasted away and the malnourished infants resembled, in Arthur Koestler’s awful description, embryos floating in alcohol bottles. Villagers devoured horse manure for the occasional grain of wheat it contained. Others ate bark and rotten potatoes or resorted to cannibalism. Millions simply died.

Betty and Guido watched the miserable huddle of mud-coloured men and women, clothed in rags and too tired and hungry to even protest as the barge shipped them away. The Intourist guide dismissed these human cattle with bureaucratic nonchalance. ‘Waste no pity on them,’ she said. ‘If they chose to become good citizens and work in a collective, they would have a house to live in and plenty to eat.’

Yet even her casual brutality did not shake their faith. A few days later they could still applaud the arrival of a troupe of travelling Komsomol propagandists who, with the same genuine enthusiasm they’d seen in Moscow, came on board to perform a series of skits lauding the regime and its achievements. On the train through Rostov-on-Don, Betty and Guido sat exchanging food and drinks with other travellers and joining in the rowdy toasts to ‘international goodwill, the glory of the Revolution, Comrade Stalin, and anything else which happens to occur to the celebrants’.

In the Ukraine, the heart of the famine, their guide brought them to a collective farm, a showcase for the successes of Soviet agriculture. Grain stretched in yellow fields to the horizon, the proof, Betty and Guido agreed, of the Soviet victory over hunger. Their doubts receded. All the sacrifices were indeed worth it. Collectivisation meant prosperity, and the displaced people they’d seen were, just as the guide had said, a regrettable consequence of peasant resistance to modernity.

Of course, Guido knew nothing about agriculture. He saw a field of grain: how could he possibly judge how the harvest compared to previous seasons or make any meaningful assessments of the farm sector nationwide? Later, Freda mocked the ‘communists and fellow-travellers, many of whom had never seen the inside of a factory or power station … [who] came on conducted tours of the Soviet Union and worshipped before the shrine of the machine’. Farm or factory, the proof worked the same way: the political enthusiasts stood before a substantial and complex institution and took their own bafflement as evidence that the Soviets knew best.

Guido and Betty, in their last weeks in the Soviet Union, frequently crossed paths with a young Joseph Kennedy, the elder brother of JFK, who had come to Russia in his vacation
from studying at the LSE. Joe Kennedy was boisterous and good-humoured, and when Guido and Betty ran into him in Rostov-on-Don, he provided a welcome antidote to some of the stuffier bureaucrats. They didn’t realise that, like his father, the Kennedy patriarch Joseph Patrick, Joe junior was an enthusiastic anti-Semite who had just visited Hitler’s Germany and thought it a tremendous place.

‘As you know,’ he wrote back to his family, ‘[Hitler] has passed the sterilisation law which I think is a great thing. It will do away with many of the disgusting specimens of men which inhabit this earth. He has made the whole movement a brotherhood in which both rich and poor mingle.’

When he encountered Guido and Betty again in Yalta, Joe greeted them with a Nazi salute and a vigorous shout of ‘Heil Hitler!’, much to the horror of his Intourist minder. Yet the young Kennedy—scarcely predisposed to Marxism—also fell under the spell of the mighty Plan, and returned to the United States with an enthusiasm for the Kremlin to rival his admiration for the man of destiny in Berlin.

In Yalta, Guido and Betty also encountered a friend of Freda’s called Dementiev. The Communist Party had, in one of its cryptic signals of displeasure, relegated Dementiev to running an Odessa hotel, and they drove with him to that city. He exuded a silent misery and his body was slack with defeat, though it was only much later they understood the fate to which he had resigned himself.

Odessa was the last stop on their tour. In this isolated outpost of Soviet rule, Guido encountered, much to his amazement, two acquaintances from Sydney. In a flush of idealism, they’d moved to Russia and taken out Soviet citizenship. Now they were stranded. They lived well enough, though their lives were simple, but they were terribly homesick, thousands of miles from everything they’d previously known.

‘Yes, it’s all right here,’ said the woman, ‘there’s nothing to complain of, but it’s lonely. Very lonely.’

Both Betty and Guido could sympathise—and that, in itself, hinted at an ambivalence about the Soviet Union they couldn’t even admit to themselves. They supported Stalin, they backed the regime, they approved of its plans for socialist construction. But they were still glad to be leaving.

The day their vessel left Odessa, their final sight of the Soviet Union was the two unhappy Australians, forlorn refugees on the shores of Utopia, waving as the ship pulled away.
Melbourne/Sydney

‘Just where are you getting to?’

Guido and Betty arrived back in Australia in January 1935. Away from Leningrad’s cramped squalor, the disappointments of Soviet life mattered less than the determination they’d found in the best of the Russian cadres. A bright new Russia was, despite obstacles and setbacks, creeping out from under the shadow of Czarism. Surely wealthy Australia could build socialism while avoiding the more regrettable elements of the Soviet experience.

They both wanted to join the Australian party. For Guido, membership meant returning to his political home, the place where he knew he belonged. Betty saw it as the consolidation of her new identity as a socially conscious writer: Betty Davies would never have possessed a party card, but for Betty Roland, it was essential.

Guido’s inevitable self-criticism was this time largely a formality. He had, after all, been employed in the Soviet Union, and a man who was good enough for Moscow would certainly do for Melbourne. Accepted as probationary members of the Communist Party, they threw themselves into political activity. They sold the new Victorian communist paper *Workers’ Voice* outside factories. They chalked slogans on the pavement. They went to branch meetings and caucuses and FOSU evenings. They were enthusiastic and happy.

Their only worry—and it bothered Betty more than Guido—related to their accommodation. When they separated, Guido had deeded Larnoo over to Neura. Though she’d planned to marry Mike, their turbulent relationship had temporarily collapsed, leaving Neura sharing the Ivanhoe house with her teenage niece, Harriet. She met Guido and Betty at the wharf, ushered them back to Larnoo and did her best to welcome them as comrades and friends. But it was a strange and uncomfortable situation, especially since Harriet radiated hostility, and Betty could not help but regard Neura as a dangerous rival.

Matters only worsened when Mrs Whiteaway, Neura’s elderly mother, joined the household. She lacked the refinement acquired by her glamorous daughter and Betty recorded, rather appalled, her ocker assessment of the summer weather.

‘It was so ’ot,’ she explained, ‘I ’ad to put me ’anky over me ’ead!’

Mother Whiteaway harboured conventional views about matrimony, entirely out of sympathy with the unorthodoxies of Larnoo where her daughter’s husband slept happily with another woman in his wife’s house. To placate her mother, Neura pleaded with Guido and
Betty to keep their relationship secret and they acquiesced, even though the deception required Guido to ostentatiously take himself off into Neura’s bedroom in the evenings before sneaking out later to join Betty. The old woman, her suspicions unallayed, responded by sitting up later and later to scrutinise the sleeping arrangements, until Neura subdued her with warm milk, liberally laced with brandy.

Mike and Neura eventually managed another reconciliation, resolving to meet each other in Shanghai. Betty, in undisguised relief, watched as ‘Harriet and her grandmother, more confused than ever, went back to where they had come from and peace descended on Larnoo’. Politically, much had changed while Guido and Betty had been overseas. Spooked by Hitler’s victory in Germany, the Comintern had lurched from ‘Class Against Class’ into a desperate search for political allies. Instructed by Stalin to form a Popular Front with progressive elements of the bourgeoisie, the communist leadership in Australia began courting the very people they had dismissed as ‘social fascists’ a few years earlier, though without acknowledging any error.

The party’s new line, according considerable importance to fellow travellers, brought many of Guido’s oldest friends to the fore. Percy Laidler, though not publicly a member, appeared regularly on CPA platforms and occasionally wrote for the party press. Katharine Prichard led the campaign to defend the anti-fascist journalist Egon Kisch, a struggle that drew Christian Jollie Smith, Vance and Nettie Palmer and Neura Baracchi into the fight against the new Attorney-General, Robert Gordon Menzies.

The staccato rhythm of activism ruled their life once more. Guido commenced a new round of educational classes, speaking occasionally on the Yarra Bank, and more often at party and FOSU meetings. The scorn WAC had received was forgotten, and Betty, with her credentials as a playwright and her knowledge of Soviet drama, was charged with the formidable and exhilarating task of transforming amateur actors into a progressive theatre.

She titled the first production that she wrote and directed *Wedding Bells*. This rather heavy-handed satire on bourgeois matrimony took on an extra piquancy, both because of Betty’s own jealousy of Neura who was still Guido’s legal wife, but also because the performance featured Isobel Renfree in one of the lead roles. Guido still took little interest in either his ex-lover or their child; one can only imagine how Isobel felt acting as the queen in a skit written by Guido’s new love, ‘in which,’ as the *Workers’ Voice* explained, ‘the charming “royal romance” is completely debunked’.

Though communists conceded all kinds of principles to their respectable Popular Front allies, their support for the Soviet Union remained as staunch as ever. In early 1934, with Guido and Betty still overseas, Katharine Prichard serialised, in the *Herald*, an account of her travels through the Soviet Union. The doubts she’d voiced in Leningrad vanished, as she
sketched not the nation she’d found, but the one she’d wanted to see, an entirely fanciful place where collective farming proceeded with the rustic gaiety of Merrie England. In Prichard’s account, a Ukrainian peasant explains, ‘We live well. This has been a wonderful harvest. Ochen kraseny (very beautiful, splendid). We have been working from daylight until dark to get it all in—though the boys and girls are not too tired to sing and dance at eleven and twelve o’clock at night, sometimes when Kolya, or one of the others, starts to play his harmoniska.’

In the real Soviet Union of 1933, collectivisation in the Ukraine involved less harmoniska playing and more slow starvation, with 25 000 peasants dying each and every day of that terrible season. Prichard might not have known the extent of the devastation but, equally, she made no attempt to find out, and if her blind optimism about the Soviet Union owed something to her guilt and grief after her husband’s suicide, her articles—and the book they later became—still helped to hide a crime of monstrous proportions.

When it came their turn to speak about what they had seen, Guido and Betty followed Katharine’s example. Addressing FOSU about humour in the Soviet Union, Guido correctly characterised Russian wit as voicing the ‘tremendous difficulties the working people of the Soviet Union have had to overcome’, but added that it also showed them ‘overcoming all such difficulties victoriously’. He must have known that humour during the Stalin era actually focused, to the extent that people dared, on the failings of the regime. As the communist press lauded employees who exceeded their quotas, Russian workers, struggling with the resulting speed-ups, repeated a joke about the awarding of prizes on a collective farm. The manager presented the ‘leading pig-tender’ with first prize—‘the complete works of our beloved Comrade Stalin!’

A voice from the back of the room piped up, ‘Just what the bitch deserves!’

Guido prudently kept the pig-tender story to himself, just as Betty concealed what she knew of women’s life in the Soviet Union. For Working Woman, one of the party front publications, she contributed a comparison of motherhood in Australia and the Soviet Union, lauding the Russian system for the provision of ‘free hospital and medical attention and a nurse to visit [a new mother] as long as it is felt that either she or the baby is in need of such attention’.

Yet Betty understood full well the limits of that attention, since Freda had told her of the ghastly treatment she’d received after a miscarriage—her curette performed without anaesthetic and then repeated unnecessarily because the gynaecologist, who didn’t bother to wash her hands, forgot to cross her name off the list. When Freda asked for a cloth to wipe away the blood, someone handed her a dirty piece of cotton wool from the floor.
Betty’s report praised abortion in the Soviet Union, a service provided, she assured the women of Melbourne, with none of the hypocrisy with which the bourgeois world cloaked it. Shortly thereafter, newspapers announced the reintroduction of anti-abortion legislation in Russia, and Australian communists immediately applauded Comrade Stalin’s new enthusiasm for enforced maternity. ‘The prohibition [on abortion] will do no harm,’ explained Workers’ Voice. ‘It is, on the contrary, in the best interests of all the people.’

Crass reversals of this nature hardly helped to quell whatever doubts Guido and Betty secretly harboured about their Soviet experience. Unlike Katharine, Betty chose not to write up her travel notes, a decision probably reflecting her ongoing unease. She’d kept a diary, clearly intended for publication, but gave up on producing a book that, under the circumstances, could only be dishonest. Yet both she and Guido were prepared to countenance a certain public evasiveness, if this were the price of admission into the ranks of communism.

It was, after all, the era in which the party fought its greatest fights, with slogans that still contain their portion of romance. ‘Free the Scottsboro Boys!’ demanded Workers’ Voice, defending American blacks on death row. ‘Hands off Abyssinia!’ it cried in response to Mussolini’s adventure in Africa, while from 1936, the Spanish republican slogan, ‘Non pasaran!’ (‘They shall not pass!’) became the promise on the lips of every progressive in the country.

With Stalin’s Russia the loudest opponent of Hitler’s Germany, perfect scrupulousness about the Soviet Union seemed an unaffordable luxury. As the American communist Joseph Freeman explained, ‘You could travel to Russia … and write volumes of backwardness and hardship you saw … even though every instance you recorded were by itself true, your picture of the Soviet Union as a whole would be false … When people saw only the negative side of the October Revolution … and at the same time ignored the great changes, the construction, the immense movement forward—they lied monstrously.’

The Soviet Union made the Communist Party possible; the Communist Party provided the only flicker of hope in a darkening decade. Communism helped Betty and Guido face the cataclysm approaching in Europe, transforming the looming disaster from a natural calamity to be dumbly endured into a social process that was understandable and—potentially—avoidable.

Political commitment permitted Betty to understand her love for theatre not as a middle-class indulgence but as a social intervention: by writing and directing, she was using her particular talents to pull back the reins on a nation’s gallop to war. Guido could combine his passion for theory with an immediate practice: reading Capital with his students in the morning and conspiring to distribute anti-war leaflets throughout an army camp in the
afternoon. He talked at FOSU about fascism and finance capital; he painted a train carriage, while Betty kept watch, with enormous letters: ‘Stop the Spanish Civil War! Death to Franco the Butcher! Workers of the World Unite!’

The party made them participants rather than onlookers, and that, in and of itself, rendered the impersonal cruelty of history a little more bearable.

With Neura in Shanghai, the beautiful garden at Larnoo filled again with a hubbub of meetings and parties, though perhaps of a more sedate tenor than earlier in the decade. The political mood had become more serious, but the party had also grown substantially—by the end of 1935, it claimed 3000 members—and, in its new respectability, frowned on overt bohemianism, with an internal circular cautioning the comrades against ‘loose habits’.

Still, if the riverside soirées no longer swung with the same frantic gaiety, Betty and Guido maintained a private connection with the old bohemian crowd. They visited Justus Jorgensen and his disciples out at the property which he had acquired at Eltham, watching them shape mud bricks and lay the foundations for the Montsalvat complex.

Mervyn Skipper, a Bulletin journalist who had fallen under Jorgensen’s spell, was working on a novel. In his notes for it, he included a sketch of Guido. ‘There was something friendly and warm about him,’ he wrote. ‘Despite his weak voice, his indecisive manner and his amiability, which were the stamp rather of a clerk or a small businessman than a remaker of societies, he commanded a great deal of influence … None of his former mistresses, for some reason, had been allowed to wreck his relations with his handsome and intelligent wife or drag him into the divorce court nor had they ceased to be friendly to him or he to them.’

Skipper’s fascination with the curious terms of Guido’s separation from Neura only grew when she arrived, once more without Mike, from China and briefly shared Larnoo again, until the reappearance of the disagreeable Harriet cooled even Guido’s enthusiasm for co-habitation. After a burst appendix brought Betty’s theatrical career temporarily to an end, the time seemed right for a holiday. They set off for an extended trip through Gippsland and southern New South Wales, with Guido’s little car towing a caravan as far as Bateman’s Bay. Betty was euphoric.

‘It was a second honeymoon,’ she recalled in her memoirs. ‘We took Mate [the red setter] along with us and he was almost as ecstatic as ourselves, hanging his head out the window, long ears flapping in the wind, going crazy when he saw a rabbit or a cow … We paused for a few days at Mallacoota Inlet, held captive by the golden beaches and the brilliant blue of the sea. When the fishing fleet came in, late in the afternoon, we bought shining silver fish and grilled them over a driftwood fire. Some of the locals came to talk to us and were invited inside the caravan to have a drink, but when Guido started to spread a little communist propaganda they looked uncomfortable and said goodnight.’
The trip brought them as close together as they’d ever been. Camping at Twofold Bay, next to the ruins of an old hotel, Guido suggested that they have a child. Betty, since the loss of her son, had been longing for another baby but had abandoned the hope, reasoning that Guido, already with children in whom he took no interest, would scarcely want more.

‘Now he had deliberately taken measures to show me I was wrong,’ she wrote, ‘and I was overcome with joy.’

When they returned to Melbourne, Neura announced a further reconciliation with Mike. This time, she intended to install him in Larnoo. The decision left Betty and Guido temporarily homeless, and Betty, who wanted to get as far away from the scenes of her old middle-class life as possible, broached a move to Sydney. To her delight, Guido agreed. It was, after all, the centre of the communist movement, the city from which most of the party’s theoretical productions came. He’d never liked Melbourne much, anyway, and a relocation to Sydney made perfect sense.

Larnoo belonged to Neura and so Guido abandoned all the possessions he’d accumulated—with the exception of his mighty collection of books, some eleven packing crates in total. In Sydney, they were starting a new life, based initially in Balmain, an impeccably working-class suburb where, for twenty-five shillings a week, ‘we had the upper floor of a two-storey house with a magnificent view of the harbour and the bridge and at night the glittering lights of Luna Park’.

The move to Sydney confirmed Guido’s return from the party’s fringe to its heart, a reconciliation crowned with his appointment to the editorial board of the theoretical journal Communist Review. The rehabilitation, however, came at a price.

In the week that Betty and Guido returned to Australia in 1935, the Australian communist papers reported the murder of the Soviet leader Sergei Kirov. The CPA accepted without question Stalin’s denunciation of a conspiracy of fascist Trotskyites, and approved in advance whatever cruelty the dictator chose to mete out in response. ‘The Australian militant workers,’ said the Workers’ Weekly, ‘endorse the merciless class-justice measures for the suppression of this clique of bandit tools of the imperialist counter-revolution.’

Mercy swiftly vanished as, over the next year, the gears of the Great Terror gripped and turned. Kirov’s death, in exceedingly murky circumstances, plunged ordinary Russians and Bolshevik leaders alike into Stalin’s mincer. In August 1936, Zinoviev and Kamenev, the two most prominent of Lenin’s collaborators, appeared in the dock for the first of the great Show Trials: a macabre spectacle of self-abnegation and humiliation, in which these old Marxists, veterans of decades of struggle for socialism, confessed to impossible, outlandish crimes. Murder, sabotage, meetings with the Gestapo, alliances with the Mikado of Japan—they
signed their names to a long catalogue of treachery, all apparently engineered and masterminded by the exiled Leon Trotsky.

Zinoviev, puffy and stricken with asthma, gasped out: ‘I should like to repeat that I am fully and utterly guilty … Trotskyism is a variety of fascism and Zinovievism a variety of Trotskyism.’ Kamenev, vainly trying to shield his young son, called for his own execution: ‘Twice my life has been spared. But there is a limit to everything.’

The Communist Party of Australia, of course, endorsed all the verdicts, repeating with gusto prosecutor Vyshinsky’s slogan: ‘Shoot the mad dogs!’ It marshalled the authority of fellow travellers around the world behind the verdicts. ‘To have assumed that this proceeding was invented and staged,’ said Joseph E Davies, the US ambassador to Russia, ‘would be to presuppose the creative genius of Shakespeare and the genius of Belasco in stage production.’ The poet Louis Aragon declared, ‘To claim innocence for these men is to adopt the Hitlerian thesis on all points.’ Upton Sinclair assured the world that the defendants received only what they deserved while DN Pritt, the British QC, watched the Zinoviev trial and announced: ‘I was indeed impressed! A fine system and a fine tradition!’

Still, the assurances of ambassadors, lawyers and poets could not altogether dispel the odour of violence wafting out from the trial transcripts. Nettie Palmer certainly detected it. She’d returned to Australia after a Spanish holiday that had introduced her first-hand to the opening shots in the civil war. For the rest of the decade, she campaigned against fascism, inevitably working closely with Communist Party activists. But she retained sufficient independence of mind to query the Russian trials and executions; as she quite sensibly wrote to Vance, ‘the verbal sameness of the confessions of all those men had a sinister side’.

The specific methods necessary to produce such remarkable courtroom uniformity—physical torture, a conveyor belt of interrogations stretching continuously over weeks, threats against families carefully seasoned with promises of amnesty—might have been a mystery, but Guido, at least, knew something about the psychological process of recantation. The distinction between objective and subjective truths encouraged comrades to promulgate doctrines they didn’t believe and to denounce their real convictions; when the party line turned against them, they found themselves with no foundations from which to argue. In the late twenties, Guido understood, at one level, the idiocy of describing the ALP as fascist. Yet, when he tried to rejoin the party, he accepted its Third Period formulations, and so lacked any basis to object when the leadership instructed him to confess to his own social fascist proclivities.

Besides, the very extremity of the Moscow Trials—the aspect that so shocked Nettie Palmer—disposed Guido to accept them. The Old Bolsheviks in the courtroom did not merely acknowledge political mistakes; they confessed to wholesale slaughter, espionage and sabotage. Their fantastic accounts allowed no possibility for error. You endorsed the Soviet
version or you contemplated the unthinkable: that Stalin and his allies were perpetrating a murderous fraud of monstrous proportions.

It was not a conclusion which Guido was prepared to harbour, even though the trials disturbed him deeply. In 1920, during the struggle for a Communist Party, he and Laidler had printed, for the first time in Australia, Zinoviev’s pamphlet on industrial unionism. Had the man whose arguments helped reorient the best of the Wobblies really become a Gestapo agent? As Guido reassured Nettie that all was well in Moscow and that the Soviets truly knew best, he fought against his own doubts as much as hers.

Inevitably, he turned to Marxist dialectics. Was not the interpenetration of opposites fundamental to Marx? Ice turned from a solid into flowing liquid; under heat, water became steam. The confessions in the Soviet Union, he explained to Nettie, demonstrated a similar process at work. Under certain extreme circumstances, an Old Bolshevik transmuted from a revolutionary socialist into a fascist and saboteur.

Nettie remained unconvinced. She lacked Guido’s emotional attachment to the Soviet Union and all that it represented, and so could bring, unhampered, her native intelligence to bear. The acorns that became oak trees in Engels’ dialectic were no more convincing to her than Guido’s lecture at the Writers’ League, where he quoted Shakespeare’s Richard III to illustrate the psychology by which Trotsky, the leader of the revolution, became a tool of Hitler.

The stubborn persistence of Nettie’s doubts induced Ralph Gibson—who, throughout his communist career, sensitively massaged the party’s intellectual sympathisers—to caucus with Guido and the anti-war activist Arthur ‘Bluey’ Howells about the best way to persuade her of the impartiality of the Soviet judiciary. Immediately afterwards, Guido relayed to Nettie the party’s concerns about her ‘Trotskyism’, an indiscretion that dismayed Gibson and Nettie alike.

‘Blue thinks,’ wrote Gibson to Guido, after Nettie had angrily confronted him, ‘that [Nettie’s] reaction to what she considers unjust statements by party members may be to make her less friendly to the party.’

He cautioned Guido to say nothing more for the time being. ‘Probably,’ Gibson continued, ‘she was not conscious of the Trotskyist flavour in her views. Certainly she resents herself and Trotskyism being mentioned in the same breath—which is very healthy. Also the tendencies may now be more past than present (we shall inquire more on this point).’

There was much to keep Gibson’s heresy hunters busy. After failing to dispel Nettie’s doubts over the Zinoviev trials, Bluey Howells came, a few months later, to share them. Though not a party member himself, he had been attending study classes at which
communists ritually extolled Karl Radek as a theoretician of genius—and then he read the news of Radek’s arrest.

‘I went to the next class,’ Howells recalled, ‘and asked the leader for some information about Radek. There was a stony silence—all eyes were turned upon me. The woman fixed me with a withering eye and said, “Comrade, I would not touch Radek with a twenty-foot pole.”’

Deeply troubled, Bluey turned to the more experienced Percy Laidler for advice. What was going on, he asked, when the comrades condemned overnight a man they had previously so admired, in circumstances in which they couldn’t possibly know the facts of his case?

But Laidler had already sealed his own Faustian pact with the Communist Party. The communists treated him as an honoured veteran. They welcomed him onto the speakers’ platform at meetings and rallies. They gave him space in their press. Querying Moscow’s treatment of Radek—or anyone else—threatened all of that, and so the best Laidler could do was urge Howells to take a holiday. If Bluey got away for a few weeks, Laidler suggested, he’d feel much better, for when he returned, the Radek affair would have subsided and Howells could put all the unpleasantness behind him.

Not everyone accepted such evasions. The CPA’s gyrations during the early thirties had produced a small number of genuine Trotskyists. In Sydney, Jack Sylvester, a former Communist Party activist, had formed what he called the Workers Party and, though its membership remained tiny, its publications and arguments circulated secretly amongst those of the older communist members who sensed that something had gone terribly wrong with the movement they’d joined. Jack Kavanagh, who had been expelled in 1934 after confessing that he did not consider Trotsky an ‘absolute counter-revolutionary’, now exchanged critical letters and documents with the ex-members Jack and Edna Ryan. The increasingly cynical Hig, employed by the Workers Educational Association in northern Tasmania, belonged to their circle, while in Melbourne May Brodney’s disquiet about the behaviour of local communists had extended to dismay over Stalinist repression in Spain. She corresponded with Wally Mohr, a foundation member of the Melbourne branch, who was attending Trotskyist meetings in Sydney.

Among these old socialists—in many ways, the cream of the first communist generation—Guido’s opinion carried considerable weight, and when they’d heard that he’d written for the Communist Review a justification of the Radek trial, the news produced, as the party leaders no doubt anticipated, a certain consternation.

‘Guido is being a good boy,’ opined Hig in one of his letters to Kavanagh and the Ryans. He attributed much of Guido’s motivation to his longstanding personal dislike for Radek but blamed him, nonetheless, for not understanding ‘the effects of slander campaigns on the thoughts and actions of non-communist anti-fascists and “progressives”’.
Hig, however, missed the point. When Guido’s article ‘Twenty Years of Karl Radek’ did appear, it contained innumerable anecdotes about Radek’s vanity and perfidy, but its real import came in its penultimate paragraph. ‘I can vouch,’ wrote Guido, ‘… for the reality of the process which begins in a row with the Communist Party and ends, if not checked in good time, on the wrong side of the class struggle, since I have experienced its initial stages in my own person.’

Here was what the communist leadership sought—a widely respected former dissident publicly acknowledging that divergences from the party line led, inexorably, to betrayal. The essay lent the authority of Guido’s theoretical acumen, personal popularity and long career to the proposition that those who bucked the Comintern would, whatever their intentions, end as miserably as Radek, Zinoviev and Kamenev: fascists, traitors and spies, justly punished by Moscow. In return, Guido became eligible to once more work in the highest levels of the communist movement.

The bargain he’d struck appalled some of his oldest friends. In the first weeks after he moved to Sydney, Guido unexpectedly met Frank Stevens, a comrade from the International Industrial Workers, the Labor College and the first, idealistic days of Melbourne communism. Stevens had been editing the FOSU newspaper in New South Wales, until his dismay at events in the Soviet Union forced his resignation and eventually led him to Trotskyism. Now impoverished, half-starved and distraught, with the foundation on which he’d built his life buckling and warping all around him, Stevens hailed his old comrade Baracchi as a much-needed ally—only to discover that Guido, too, was a propagandist for Stalin.

They argued at length, in a heated, emotional debate, but neither convinced the other. After they parted, Guido, in a typically gracious gesture, sent Frank a copy of his translation of Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, inscribed, ‘Despite political differences, to my old revolutionary comrade, Frank Stevens, from GB’. They met once more, after the publication of Guido’s Radek article, and argued again, but Stevens’ collapsing physical and mental health made it impossible for him to mount much of a case. Guido bought him some food and promised to provide some medical help.

It was too late. In despair about himself and the world, Frank Stevens drank poison.

When the news of Stevens’ death reached Melbourne, May Brodney dashed off a bitter letter to Guido. She had known him as an enthusiast for the Wobblies and their larrikin rebellion back when, in a simpler world, she and Lesbia worked side by side in the factory, and she found his dutiful submission to the CPA’s authority incomprehensible. She came very close to blaming him for Stevens’ suicide.
‘Frank, no doubt,’ she wrote, ‘felt that the position was hopeless when you had “communists” being more corrupt—more barefaced in lying, in hypocrisy and in misleading the workers than the worst parasites in other camps.’

She flatly refused to believe that Guido accepted ‘the rubbish in that article’ and so berated him for trying to dupe his readers about the real situation in the Soviet Union. ‘They wake up to it, Guido,’ she continued. ‘Because you fool them for a time you make a mistake in thinking you can get away with it. You are only doing the fascists’ job for them and doing it more effectively than the rotten fascists themselves could do it. … Today Stalin is reported to have started anti-semitism but, of course, why not?’

Her scorn was such that, as she later admitted, she didn’t really expect him to answer. Guido, however, produced a lengthy response. ‘I am writing a friendly reply for, although you prepared me a “bitter dish”, I do not believe you would have addressed me as “Dear Guido” if you had really felt unfriendly towards me personally. Moreover, whatever our political differences at the moment, I want wherever possible to avoid breaks with people I know are on the side of the workers, since I feel that we will all be forced inevitably to get together before very long, and it seems a duty not to put a single unnecessary obstacle in the way of the earliest possible consummation of this process.’

He outlined the details of his relations with Stevens, and the help he’d tried to give him. ‘He thought I had got away from fundamentals through immersion in everyday work; I thought he was too emotional, too exaggerated in his statements and too inclined to become almost incoherent to make a fruitful outcome to our argument possible. We parted good friends … but, alas, for the last time … He was the soul of decency, as you so well put it … The day of the inquest I held his ashes in my hands. A sad and troubling memory.’

On the question of the Communist Review piece, he denied prostituting his convictions. ‘My mind is not closed,’ he told May, ‘there may be new facts or new interpretations of old facts I do not know, but in the face of all the evidence, etc, I have at my disposal, I cannot do other than still adhere to the main points of my Radek article … Of course, I am not asking you to agree with my views, but only to believe that I do hold them.’

As for the Soviet Union and the Communist Party, he suggested they agree to disagree. ‘At least let us resolve,’ he concluded, ‘each in our own way, to work for real working-class unity, and to strive never to let ourselves be provoked to actions in the other direction. And then, in the end, along with every honest fighter for socialism, whatever may still divide us now, we will come together.’

It was a gracious letter, yet it infuriated May. And no wonder. Guido might regard his former comrades as ‘honest fighters for socialism’ but the central committee of the Communist Party publicly labelled them gangsters and fascist murderers. The Workers’
Weekly explicitly demanded ‘ruthless struggle against any Trotskyist or semi-Trotskyist tendencies that may, from time to time, attempt to find support for Trotskyism in the Australian labour movement’, and warned its readers against “liberalism” or underestimation of the counter-revolutionary role of Trotskyism’.

‘The graciousness of your reply was not lost on me,’ May wrote, in an even angrier second letter, ‘but I would be more pleased if you pulled your weight in the CP and cultivated a “Go to hell” attitude to me or anyone else who disagrees.’ She wanted him, in essence, to face up to reality. In Spain and Russia, the communists murdered their opponents. Even in Australia, they occasionally resorted to physical violence as part of the ‘ruthless struggle’ that the Workers’ Weekly demanded, a habit that made Guido’s assurances of respect for his former allies ring rather hollow.

‘I suppose you knew that the CP had arranged for a gang of thugs to beat Frank up,’ May continued. ‘At least we can agree surely on that point that this is not a way to settle our differences. More recently I have had news of window smashing and the beating up of Trotskyists in Sydney.’

As far as she was concerned, he was deliberately shutting out the political ugliness all around him. ‘Just where are you getting to Guido?’ she snapped. ‘I am not alone in my criticism. One of our mutual friends dismisses it by saying that “Guido always was weak and would prefer to be in the midst of the flock rather than on the outer.” But hang it all, you have some mental equipment which must debar you from accepting what all those fools in the CP so readily accept.’

She’d hit on both the strength and the weakness of his position. His stress on unity implicitly acknowledged that the Communist Party so dominated the Left that a mass movement without its participation was unthinkable. Therefore, for Guido, though he didn’t spell it out, socialist unity could only take place on the CPA’s terms and so the place for any radical was inside the party—even if that required swallowing the less palatable aspects of Stalinist doctrine.

To an extent, his experiences in Sydney seemed to bear the argument out, since the party gave access for both Guido and Betty to a range of activities unthinkable had they not been members. For Guido, there were more study classes to run, a task that he could perform far better than anyone else in the organisation. The Communist Review provided him with a relatively sophisticated organ of Marxist theory, where he could apply both his editorial and political experience as well as taking specific responsibility for a feature known as ‘Question Box’, using his wide reading to provide answers to readers’ esoteric queries.

Just as importantly, the Review meant working alongside those communists most interested in Marxist philosophy. He became, in particular, close friends with James
Normington Rawling, another gentle but determined intellectual who, after his experiences in
the trenches, had turned from proselytising the Book of Mormon to preaching the gospel of
communism. Rawling edited the Movement Against War and Fascism’s magazine War?
What for?, wrote learnedly on labour history for the Communist Review and, though he
generally supported the party line, maintained a certain intellectual independence.

For Betty, the Sydney branch provided a thriving theatrical culture in which she was soon
an enthusiastic participant. As a communist, she could work on plays agitating for union
rights or opposition to fascism. To a party critic, these avenues would be closed. What then
was to be gained by joining the carping chorus of ex-members, the shrillness of whose
denunciations only drew attention to their own irrelevancy?

Yet Guido continued to read the literature of the dissidents, given to him by Kavanagh.
While it didn’t change his mind, it niggled away at him like the voice of conscience. In her
second letter, May noted the extent to which his Communist Review articles dwelt upon
aspects of his own life. She saw in this only self-aggrandisement and rebuked him for
‘nauseating swank’. But his pleasure in the past reflected the disquiet he felt about the
present. In his ‘Anti-Conscription Memory’ of later that year, he rather wistfully recalled the
purity of Frederick Sinclaire’s slogan: ‘Resist much, obey little!’, a motto so obviously out of
sympathy with the dishonest thirties.

The correspondence with May broke off, unresolved. It would be a long time before they
would again consider each other comrades, much less friends.

Still, Guido had much else to preoccupy him. Plans for his own Walter Burley Griffin
designed house in Melbourne had fallen through because of his Russian trip but, here in
Sydney, Griffin had acquired a substantial tract of land in Middle Harbour to develop his
distinctive vision of an integrated community at peace with itself and the landscape. He
allowed only native plants in the suburb he called Castlecrag; he built to complement rather
than dominate natural features, with roads following the curve of the hills and with distinctive
sandstone flat-roofed houses making the most of the spectacular views. These principles,
startling for their time, attracted a community of artists, freethinkers and theosophists, making
Castlecrag exactly the kind of place where Guido might settle.

He bought a parcel of land in 1937, and Griffin’s partner Eric Nicholls invited him and
Betty to move into an already-standing Griffin building, known rather charmingly as the
House of the Seven Lanterns, while they waited for the construction of their own home.

But the main reason for the move from Balmain was more personal. Almost as soon as
they arrived in Sydney, Betty discovered, to her delight, that she was pregnant. In amongst
Castlecrag’s beautiful trees, she found ‘a haven of tranquillity, and … settled in to grow my
baby in unclouded happiness’.
Revelations
‘I thought you were all glittering’

Before she entered hospital, the heavily pregnant Betty explained to Guido that in the event of her death she wanted her child to go to Neura. It was an extraordinary request, a recognition not only of Guido’s inability to parent but also of the bond Betty shared with her longstanding rival. Loving Guido, it seemed, engendered the empathy old soldiers shared, a solidarity they extended even to those who contended for the other side.

As she’d feared, the birth proved long and difficult. But she survived and, on 13 October 1937, she presented baby Gilda to the world.

Guido delighted in the little girl—or, at least, he did when time allowed. ‘Guido’s a most loyal party member now,’ Nettie had noted, ‘crowded with work … He’s accepted everywhere as a leader and yet a servant.’ Nothing changed with Gilda’s birth. ‘He would come hurrying in,’ Betty remembered, ‘kiss us both, then sit down and begin correcting proofs for the Communist Review, or notes for that night’s Marxist class. No time to talk to me, no time to gloat over the baby.’

Even as he neglected their domestic life, Guido continued to encourage Betty’s own political engagements. In Melbourne, Nettie had found Betty ‘very active and serious’ and in Sydney she became a leading contributor to New Theatre, which served, in the late thirties, as a party showpiece. In 1938, her play Are You Ready Comrade? won the Australian Theatre Council competition, a remarkable honour for a radical playwright. Mostly, though, she turned out agitprop sketches to be played out for the Domain, the street corner or the factory canteen. These pieces lacked the aesthetic sophistication of The Touch of Silk, but provided the satisfaction of direct and immediate intervention in the crises that, one after another, dominated the period.

In the Review Guido regularly published her scripts, so that the writings of Comrades Baracchi and Roland often appeared side by side: he, say, answering questions about Soviet finance, while she dramatised an industrial dispute. But an intimacy within the covers of the Review could not compensate for the domestic estrangement produced both by Guido’s work habits and, more worriedly, the attentions he paid to the secretary of the Castlecrag estate. Ula Maddocks was a friendly, gentle woman, a theosophist deeply committed to Griffin’s
ideals and devastated by his recent death, and thereafter, perhaps, searching for something to rekindle the creative excitement she’d found in the early days of Castlecrag. She was sympathetic to radical ideas and Guido did eventually recruit her to the party, but to Betty, the regularity of their discussions seemed distinctly suspicious. Ula, she thought, had definitely fallen for Guido, while his interest in her seemed to extend well beyond the comradely.

‘Yesterday,’ Betty wrote in her diary, ‘for no particular reason, Ula arrived bringing a bowl of salad. Pineapple, pawpaw, cottage cheese, and some strange tasting seeds from India.

‘She handed me the bowl, shyly, half-appealingly, as though asking for forgiveness and understanding. I do understand. Who better than I who fell for the same irresistible charm that has captured her?’

As Betty lay in hospital, recovering from the birth, Guido had presented her with a copy of the newly published *Gone with the Wind*. On the flyleaf he’d inscribed a portion of Ernest Dowson’s poem ‘Cyrana’:

> I have forgot much, Cyrana! gone with the wind,
> Flung roses, roses, riotously with the throng,
> Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind;
> But I was desolate and sick of an old Passion,
> Yea, all the time because the dance was long;
> I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

Fidelity after a fashion scarcely provided much reassurance, and Betty only found the consolation she sought inside the book itself, repeating Scarlett O’Hara’s motto: ‘I’ll think about that tomorrow!’

The tensions over Ula erupted into full-blown rows but the House of the Seven Lanterns still contained its measure of happiness, and the problems of their relationship did not seem insurmountable. Guido neglected Gilda but he clearly loved her. ‘She looks a pet,’ wrote Katharine Prichard; Guido and Betty agreed. The house they’d commissioned in Castlecrag was taking shape—a beautiful structure, protected by bush but staring down over the spectacular harbour—and, with the Nazis rattling at Europe’s gate, it was easy to understand why Guido so devoted himself to party work.

In September 1938, Betty learned of Freda Utley’s return to Britain and sent her a friendly letter, filled with the happy busyness of their days. The reply came at the end of the year. ‘Congratulations on the lovely baby girl,’ wrote Freda. ‘I am so glad.’

Then she delivered her own simple and terrible news.

‘Arcadi was arrested in April 1936,’ she wrote. ‘No trial and no charge, beyond having “been friendly or acquainted with a Trotskyist” … I had a postcard from him a year and a half ago, and since then nothing. He was sent to the Arctic. The brutes won’t even allow me a
word from him to know if he is dead or alive … I have never seen him since the night they
took him away. I left because of Jon [their son]; I was afraid they might hurt him as you know
they try to force “confessions” by threatening the victim with what they will do to his family.’

Guido and Betty knew Arcadi well. He was a man of unimpeachable integrity, utterly
dedicated, in his quiet way, to his work. They could not imagine a more loyal socialist. His
arrest was unthinkable, incredible, impossible. That they never doubted it had taken place
revealed how shallowly they’d buried the truth about Russia in their minds. Arcadi’s
disappearance gave the Terror—a dizzying 1.8 million people arrested between 1935 and
1940—a name and a face.

The OGPU came for him in the depths of the night. A knock on the door, two officers
outside—and Freda and Arcadi understood at once. They sat together in the darkness, saying
nothing, while the men searched their flat.

‘At about nine o’clock, they took him away,’ Freda wrote in her memoirs. ‘We kissed for
the last time. At the door I said, “What can I do; shall I go to R?”’

‘He shrugged his shoulders. “No one can help,” he said.

‘No words of love passed between us; they were not needed. Reserved to the last and
calm to the last, he gave me a gentle smile and was gone. I never saw him again. He passed
out of my life on that lovely April morning, in his English flannel jacket, his black head
hatless, a slight figure between the two khaki-clad OGPU officers.’

Freda did not know her husband’s fate, then or afterwards, but the archives show that, at
the time she wrote to Betty, he was already dead—shot in March 1938 after a hunger strike in
the camps. Perhaps it was kinder that the details remained obscure, since the charges against
him related largely to his wife. Again and again, Arcadi’s interrogators returned to what they
called Freda’s Trotskyite activities, while he bravely tried to shield her.

‘I find it necessary to state it once and for all,’ he told them, ‘my wife never was a
member of any counter-revolutionary organisation and did not conduct, nor does she conduct
now any counter-revolutionary activities. I refuse to reply to all future questions in regard to
my wife.’

It didn’t matter. They established to their own satisfaction that Freda had conducted
‘counter-revolutionary Trotskyite meetings’, that Utley, Arcadi and their friend Dementiev
(who, inevitably, also disappeared into the camps) belonged to a Trotskyite group, and that
Freda’s apartment had ‘served as a rallying point for the Trotskyites’.

That apartment was, of course, where Guido and Betty had lived, and though the name
Baracchi does not feature in the fragmentary interview transcript, the indictment mentions
that the supposed ‘c-r’ group included ‘Englishmen’ as well as Russians. Guido possessed the
perfect profile to whet the OGPU’s interest: a record of dissent within the CPA, alongside a
history of travelling through both Germany and Japan, the nations to which counter-
revolutionaries were generally linked. Given the viral logic of the Terror, his and Betty’s friendship with Freda and Arcadi, and their journey with Dementiev, meant that, had they taken the advice of their employers and remained in Russia as citizens, they too would most likely have been purged. It’s quite possible that the repeated suggestions that they surrender their passports represented, in fact, an attempt by the OGPU to block their escape.

The story of Rose Cohen, the woman Hig had loved to distraction, illustrated how it might have happened. The OGPU arrested Rose’s husband Max in March 1937. Suddenly tainted, she waited alone for months. No one wrote. No one rang. No one visited. In August, after five unbearable months, the soldiers came and took Rose away.

Rose counted most of the leading British communists as her personal friends. They didn’t save her. Hig’s friend Harry Pollitt, who had proposed marriage to Rose many times, arrived in Moscow on the day of her arrest. He raised her case with senior officials, including, according to one source, Stalin himself. But when he returned to London, Pollitt and his comrades not only refused to call publicly for Rose’s release, they also actively sabotaged the efforts of non-communists on her behalf. ‘Any charge that may be brought against [Cohen],’ wrote the *Daily Worker*, ‘will be tried according to the forms of Soviet justice. The British government has no right whatever to interfere in the internal affairs of another country and its citizens. It is not surprising that the reactionary press is in full cry in support of the British government protest …’

On 28 November, the guards dragged Rose into the cellars of the Lubianka prison and shot her once in the back of the head.

Clearly, had Guido and Betty been arrested, Australian communists would not have protested. The CC member Steve Purdy had shared a room with a German communist who disappeared in the purges. When Purdy arrived back in Australia, he ran from the friends who greeted his ship, screaming: ‘Don’t let them get me!’ A sanatorium restored his nerves—but he never spoke out about whatever horrors he’d seen in Russia.

Audrey Blake, the jazz-loving freethinker Guido knew from the early days of FOSU, spent 1937 in Moscow’s Hotel Lux. She watched guests slowly vanish all around her, with no particular concern. ‘As the slushy autumn gave way to the beautiful, white winter,’ she later wrote, ‘our corridor became strangely deserted and the lead seal would appear outside another apartment. But we didn’t see anyone “taken”. We never heard anything untoward … The black side of existing socialism was a closed book, and those who talked about it were “agents of the imperialists”.

When Guido showed Freda’s letter to Richard Dixon, a CC member who had studied in Russia, Dixon didn’t immediately suggest that Utley worked for the class enemy. ‘There may have been a miscarriage of justice,’ he acknowledged, rather grudgingly. But his anaemic
words of consolation (‘I can understand your being upset; a couple of friends of mine were also arrested in the Soviet Union’) sent a clear message. Dixon had successfully smothered any sentiment arising from the fate of his friends; Guido should do the same.

Of course, even had Guido managed to suppress his feelings about Arcadi’s individual case, Freda’s letter revealed a generalised terror. ‘Just about everyone [has been taken],’ she had written. ‘All the communists and socialists have been, or are being, liquidated.’ Guido had quoted Utley in his Communist Review apologia for Radek’s trial. Now Freda unveiled the queasy prospect that Radek, alongside hundreds of thousands of others, had been monstrously persecuted. The nation Guido had upheld as a beacon for the future—the proof of his theories, the hope of the world—rested upon systemic murder and institutionalised injustice.

Freda concluded her note by denouncing both Stalinism and Trotskyism, and equating the communist movement with fascism. ‘This will probably horrify you both,’ she wrote. ‘Sorry.’ Though Guido couldn’t know then just how far to the Right Utley would subsequently move (she eventually became a personal friend of Senator Joe McCarthy), he grasped at once the logic of her trajectory. Was this the choice he faced? If he ceased believing in Stalin, did he have to become something he despised, standing beside people who opposed not only the Show Trials but also every wage rise Australian workers asked for? He’d given twenty-eight years of his life to the socialist movement. From his battles with Leeper in Trinity to the street fights in Berlin—had it all been a waste of time?

For Betty, the choice was easier. Freda’s letter ended her communist enthusiasm. Betty remained a party member; she still produced political theatre. But from that moment, she chose to write generally about the working class and its struggles rather than specifically about the party, and she ceased attending branch meetings. With a small child to tend, the communist routine required a continuing effort, one she no longer felt either willing or able to make. Besides, Gilda provided a world in miniature—and one that didn’t contain the risk of further betrayals.

Guido, psychologically incapable of burying himself in family life, spent the year after the Utley letter skirting the brink of a precipice, repelled by the nothingness below. Agonised and uncertain, he added the news about Arcadi to his accumulating misgivings about the movement. Since the mid-thirties, the party had advocated collective security in the face of Nazi aggression, with communists pressuring the governments of the capitalist democracies to conclude treaties with the Soviet Union. In September 1938, the Munich agreement saw Britain and France cede part of Czechoslovakia to Hitler. For Guido, this confirmed what he suspected about the Popular Front logic—it simply wouldn’t work. Chamberlain and Daladier feared communism as much as they did Hitler. They were not allies to be trusted.
But Munich also forced him to consider a disturbing trend in communist practice: a tendency to orient to the important and the influential instead of the poor and the downtrodden. Internationally, collective security relied on governments rather than the masses, just as in Australia communists built Popular Fronts around the famous names on the anti-fascist platforms, not the shabby faces in the crowd. It wasn’t just the fawning over respectable allies that worried him, but the dissembling that seemed inevitably to accompany it. The party pushed onto the stage a sympathetic parson or a progressive novelist; the communists went about their business behind the scenes. In the Sydney Domain, Guido overheard a senior member critiquing one of the party’s stump speakers. ‘Too much class struggle about it,’ she said, ‘all right amongst ourselves, but …’

The more Guido considered it, the more he saw a culture of power running throughout the party. He choked on the leadership cult around general secretary Miles. ‘I have known many men notable in politics and literature and art,’ wrote the CP novelist Jean Devanny for an election campaign in 1938, ‘but JB Miles stands out among the biggest in intellect, in artistry, in principle … We … feel this man’s grandeur of character and rocklike stability to be something we just have to live up to.’ Guido’s appreciation of Miles’ intellect fell rather short of Devanny’s raptures, not only because JB demanded Guido provide him with the Marxist excerpts that added leaderly erudition to his pronouncements but because, rather than rocklike stability, the general secretary had presided over a series of unstable political zigzags, unconstrained by socialist principle.

In April 1939, Robert Menzies achieved an ambition he’d harboured since university days, becoming, at last, Prime Minister. Almost immediately, the man who’d ducked the Great War proposed a national register of all males between 18 and 65, a scheme widely seen as a precursor to full-blown conscription. The call to boycott this register won the support of many trade unionists, who still remembered the campaigns of 1916 and 1917.

For Guido, it was more than just another battle. The anti-conscription victories had shown him the masses in motion and turned around his life. ‘In the history of the fight for freedom,’ he wrote in 1937, ‘there is no other tradition which ranks higher than that of Anti-Conscription.’ That might have been hyperbole but psychologically it was simple fact, and it made the CPA’s vacillations on the register boycott unbearable for him.

In June, Labor’s John Curtin persuaded the Australian Council of Trade Unions to abandon the boycott campaign. Rather than clash with ALP leaders sympathetic to the Popular Front, the communists fell in behind Curtin. As Guido watched the Trotskyists gamely burning their register cards while his own organisation told workers to abandon the struggle, his misgivings swelled. He flatly refused to fill in his card. Dixon told him that the party had emerged from the national register campaign with flying colours, and he snapped: ‘This may be true. Only I do not think they were the same colours with which we entered the
campaign. It seems to me that, if we went in under the Red Flag, we came out under the Union Jack.’

Betty’s relative inactivity didn’t insulate her from the problems. New Theatre drew in the middle-class audiences the communist leaders craved, and so the shifting political winds blew particularly cold in the theatre’s rehearsal rooms. The party decided that Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*, with its criticism of labour bureaucrats, might offend union leaders; it duly disappeared from New Theatre’s repertoire. Herbert Hodge’s *Cannibal Carnival* mocked religion at a time when every Popular Front platform boasted its progressive parson and so it, too, quietly closed.

Roland had sacrificed her aesthetic ambitions on the altar of political commitment. She’d harboured no illusions about the artistic value of her agitprop sketches, but wrote them to speak openly about issues that mattered to her. Now the party demanded precisely the opposite. The best communist theatre, it asserted, concealed its communism, and she was wrong to focus exclusively on the working class.

How could she not feel betrayed?

Both Guido and Betty judged Jim Rawling to be one of the party’s more honourable characters: an intelligent and deeply serious man, whose undeniable abilities as a writer and historian irked those hacks who were instinctively suspicious of the talented. The leader of the CPA’s peace work, and a war veteran himself, Jim’s faith in collective security crumbled after Munich. Inevitably, he and Guido talked, sharing ideas, books and camaraderie. Guido explained Utley’s letter. Jim spoke of a discussion with the party poet, Gerald Peel, who had published in the *May Review* a paean to Stalin. The final verse began:

They fear him, the silent one, the unscrupulous one,
For he is no little scribbler, no vain talker, no senseless screecher
He is more powerful than they.

‘Unscrupulous? Haven’t you made a mistake?’ Jim had asked Peel. ‘Got the wrong word?’

The poet reread the line. ‘No,’ he said.

Shocked, Jim realised that, for Peel, Stalin’s lack of scruples was entirely admirable, a trait worthy of emulation.

Jim empathised, more than Betty could, with Guido’s fear of political isolation. ‘It has to be remembered,’ he wrote, in a later meditation on why he hesitated so long before confronting the Stalinists, ‘that to speak out in open opposition was to seal the death warrant of your activity … You may think a particular item is not worth the sacrifice of all the rest: you keep silence. You may think things will change: you wait. You may think this is one more atrocity and say: “I’ll reach breaking point one day.” You are caught on the spur of the
movement and you say to yourself, “I can’t decide this at once, stake everything on the throw of a dice.””

Neither man was ready for that final gamble, but their whispered conversations opened a space in which they could air the doubts each had previously confined to the darkest recesses of his mind.

In a conventional political organisation, internal questions might pale into insignificance beside the outbreak of war. The communists were different. The fate of Europe, they thought, depended on the working class. The working class relied on the Communist Party’s leadership. They felt the weight of millions pressing down upon them as they tried to decide what to do.

Even for the CPA, itself too small to shake the world, membership provided a key that unlocked the European battlefields, revealing the forces of History whirling and clicking within. What they saw scared them terribly. Throughout the thirties, communists understood the homicidal logic of Nazism, at a time when many Australians saw Hitler as merely another bombastic foreigner, and the imminent threat of fascism provided the justification for the moderation of the party line. Whatever unease members felt about specific manoeuvres, they consoled themselves with their intransigence towards Hitlerism, and bitterly denounced the Western leaders who bowed to German claims on Poland. ‘No compromise with the fascist war makers!’ demanded the *Workers’ Weekly* of 23 August 1939. On that day, the news arrived of Stalin’s non-aggression pact with the Nazis—and the CP leaders hailed the compromise they’d always opposed as ‘one of the greatest victories of the Soviet Union’s long struggle to save the world from a second imperialist war’.

Nine days later, Germany invaded Poland. When Menzies followed Britain to war, the CPA pledged its support for a struggle it dubbed a crusade against fascism and a defence of Polish rights. Shortly afterwards, Stalin invaded eastern Poland, and the party hastily explained his aggression as the liberation of the unfortunate Poles. The Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Demarcation with Hitler, and the Communist Party announced its steadfast opposition to what it suddenly identified as an unjust imperialist war.

Rawling recorded that, in those frantic weeks, the CP’s leadership ‘did not know from one day to the other what they were going to say or do’. No wonder Lance Sharkey—vying with Miles for the role of Australia’s Stalin—begged out of a promised article for the *Review* on the grounds that his ‘grammar, construction and mastery of English [were] not sufficiently high’. On the back of this note, a craven attempt to avoid writing anything that the Soviets might later wrongfoot, Guido secretly scribbled a quote from Lenin: ‘By such measures you will make only a selection of docile and stupid people. That is not what we want in the CC, docile and stupid people.’
Since its national congress of 1938, Guido had openly argued for the party to turn its anti-war slogans to society’s base rather than its apex. He’d been running a study group for the Sydney University branch where the idealism of the young members contrasted refreshingly with the grim cynicism of the party leaders and allowed him to develop his ideas on the war. Only the masses, he argued, could prevent another bloodbath. Politicians like Menzies and Churchill opposed Hitler, whose anti-communism they openly applauded, only and insofar as he challenged Britain’s strategic hegemony in Europe. They could not be relied on to fight fascism and, rather than supporting their march towards war, Marxists should be agitating to replace their governments with workers’ control.

The university group discussed Europe in September 1939 and Guido put his case. He’d developed close personal ties with the students, and many initially supported him, until the leadership’s inevitable intervention. Daphne Gollan, one member of the class, remembered: ‘We were subject to heavy pressure to desert Guido’s position, and on the vote only two of us supported him, one with eloquent argument, and the other, myself, in silence.’ Thereafter, the CC instructed the branch to ban Guido from lecturing and advised his pupils to scrub their minds of everything they’d heard from him.

When Eric Aarons, the young branch secretary, sent the note of dismissal, Guido accepted it with characteristic grace, suggesting only that organisational methods not be used to settle political questions. He reminded Aarons of Cromwell’s appeal to the Irish bishops: ‘I beseech you, gentlemen, in the bowels of Christ, to conceive it possible you are mistaken.’

But that, of course, was the problem—the party had long since evolved past the stage in which mistakes could be admitted. The leadership’s own sudden opposition to the war did nothing to ease the hostility to Guido, since the volte-face came not on any principled basis but simply as a result of the Comintern’s instructions—along lines which Tom Wright explained to Jim Rawling with breathtaking cynicism. ‘I know they’re right in Russia before they act,’ he said.

The CC resented Guido’s political independence as much as his arguments. The change in line was immaterial: what mattered was that he had opposed the CC, and he would recant or be punished.

Guido voluntarily resigned from the Communist Review, but he was not backing down. In early October, he convened a meeting of party dissidents at Castlereag. Jim arrived with a Melbourne comrade called Webster. No one knew much about the man, but he’d expressed misgivings about the party’s direction and that had been enough to warrant an invitation. They could not, after all, muster too many other supporters. When Webster and Rawling came, Guido sat in the lounge with Betty on one side and Ula Maddocks on the other. These
were the forces ranged against the party, the Soviet Union and the entire international communist movement.

Jim delivered the formal presentation, his voice hoarse with emotion. After so many years in the peace movement, he’d felt the party leaders’ support for war like a knife in his belly. The shock disinterred all the doubts he’d kept buried about the Soviet Union.

‘I instinctively hated the Stakhanovism movement,’ he confessed. ‘I feared the reintroduction of bourgeois ideas about the family. I looked upon the revocation of the rights of abortion as an infringement of the rights of women. I hated the sycophantic language used towards Stalin—language that they tried to import here and apply to Miles, as French communists applied it to Thorez and Americans to Browder. I was horrified at the annihilation of millions of peasants during the working out of the five-year plans. Then came the trials …’

Betty and Guido nodded in sympathy, but Webster’s discomfort grew visibly with each of Rawling’s new charges of Soviet perfidy, until eventually he muttered an excuse and hurried from the room. Jim drew too obviously on Trotskyist sources and, whatever doubts Webster felt about the local leadership, he would not express sympathy with Trotsky, the man the entire Comintern regarded as a fascist agent.

After this departure, the others talked for a little while longer but to no great effect, for Webster’s reaction rendered the discussion largely superfluous. Even if he didn’t inform on them, his hostility illustrated the chasm between the beliefs they now held and the consensus in the party. Already, they had crossed the line. A final confrontation could not be far away.

Jim, in any case, no longer wanted to wait. He could not continue to draw a functionary’s wage in good conscience and so he planned the terms of his exit. After years of devotion to a journal that he now saw as fundamentally dishonest, he would, he vowed, publish one edition of which he could be proud. He invited Guido to contribute a piece analysing the war, to appear alongside an article about the Soviet Union from an American Trotskyist magazine. Jim himself wrote a letter condemning the Soviet invasion of Finland, and signed it TNI—initials ostensibly of one TN Irvine but, in reality, a none too subtle plea for The New International to replace Stalin’s Comintern.

Jim successfully shepherded his journal through the early production stages but he could forestall its inevitable discovery for only so long. On 15 December, the central committee summoned him to its office, supposedly to discuss a new pamphlet. As soon as Rawling arrived, Dixon simply asked him: ‘What do you think of Trotsky?’

He could no longer equivocate. With all the dignity he could summon up, Jim stammered out a denial that Trotsky was a counter-revolutionary—and was expelled on the spot.

He’d expected the reaction; in some ways, he’d almost wanted to get it over with. But the confrontation still sent him into shock. Men he’d fought alongside for over a decade, his
comrades in many fierce struggles, stared at him with hard-faced hatred, and the physical force of their loathing sent him reeling from the office. He stumbled his way to the little bookshop where the Trotskyists met. They ushered him into their back room, sat him down and, as he quietly wept, tactfully made him a comforting cup of tea.

As soon as he recovered, he called Guido.

‘This shows it’s impossible to work in the party,’ he said. Guido, still wanting to hope, had to agree.

Almost as soon as Guido put down the phone, it rang again. It was Dixon. ‘We want to have a talk with you,’ he said—and there wasn’t much doubt what the conversation would be about. But Guido was alone with Gilda and could not leave the house, a fortunate coincidence that allowed him to postpone the meeting until the following Monday. He had a weekend to prepare.

That Saturday, Jim came to Castlecrag where, together with a few Trotskyists from the Communist League (as the Workers Party now styled itself), he composed a manifesto.

‘[The Communist Parties] have become,’ he wrote, ‘merely agents of the Russian Foreign Office, which is no longer concerned with the international working-class movement …’

The next day on the Domain, Jim distributed his leaflet to the crowd and spoke from the Trotskyist platform, where his presence horrified those of the party faithful still unaware of his apostasy.

Guido endorsed Jim’s flyer and pledged to him that they would join the Communist League together. But first he needed to settle his own accounts with the party. He arrived for his appointment at the central committee’s office on Monday, where the leadership waited with a stenographer, poised to record each heretical word.

‘I want to request as earnestly as I can,’ Guido said, ‘that you will tell me anything that you have against me, that you will put any questions that you want me to answer, but I want to ask you just to give me a little time to answer these questions and to let me give you my answers in writing.’

They refused. If his conscience was clear, he could answer on the spot. Who was this mysterious TNI? Had Guido lent anti-party material to Jim? Was he friendly with Trotskyists?

‘You know,’ said Sharkey, ‘we can be either very patient or drastic.’

Guido successfully ducked most of their queries. Yes, he’d lent books to Rawling—but then he’d also supplied Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed* to Sharkey when he’d asked for it. He didn’t know TNI and he saw nothing wrong with remaining civil towards political opponents. Why, he’d heard Ted Docker, one of his interrogators, provide quite an objective assessment of the Communist League’s Gil Roper. The embarrassed Docker hastily and
repeatedly assured his comrades of the loathing and contempt he felt for the renegade Roper. Then he turned back to Guido.

‘We designate [Trotsky] as being a foul counter-revolutionary,’ he snapped. ‘Do you agree with that?’

‘Let us assume that I was not convinced that he was such. Would you still allow me a fortnight to think about it further?’

‘Rather a weird position when a party member cannot answer that question,’ said Sharkey, sourly.

After three hours of this sparring, the CC conceded. They would put their questions in writing. Guido would respond within two weeks—and until that time, would neither speak against the party nor engage in any acts hostile to it.

The apparently simple pledge posed almost immediate difficulties, for the toxic atmosphere in the party turned basic decency into a factional statement. Jim wanted to collect his few personal possessions from his old office, but Sharkey had hissed at him something sinister about the fate of Trotskyists in the Soviet Union, and he now feared he would be physically attacked if he ventured onto communist property. Would Guido accompany him to the party offices to see that no violence was done?

Guido’s hesitation before answering illustrated just how far matters had degenerated. The party’s new constitution listed ‘association with Trotskyists’ alongside drunkenness, strike-breaking and degeneracy as offences equally punishable by expulsion. Anyone seen with Jim faced, in theory, immediate expulsion. With his own membership already hanging by a thread, Guido begged Christian Jollie Smith to help. She refused—and he could think of no one else whom he might ask.

So he walked Jim back to the office and he watched the party members deny him the contents of his desk. The petty spite involved in retaining Jim’s pathetic bundle of personal effects prefigured a full-scale assault on his reputation in the party press. Rawling was a coward, said one correspondent; a lunatic, suggested another; a weakling and a fascist, argued a third. Katharine Prichard weighed in, declaring herself ‘appalled’ by Rawling’s conduct.

‘At this critical period,’ she wrote, ‘to permit oneself Trotskyist divagations strikes me as intellectual dilettantism, incapable of adjusting to the needs of the working-class movement.‘

The abuse rang in Guido’s ears, even as he struggled to get his own divagations down on paper. Neither Prichard nor anyone else engaged with Jim’s arguments, slandering the man without replying to a word he said. Why, then, did what Guido write matter? Jim and Betty were waiting for him so that they could collectively join the Trotskyists. Tactically, a quick reply made sense, allowing the inevitable expulsions to coincide for maximum impact.

Guido, however, had left the party precipitately once before and regretted it afterwards for years, and this time he wanted certainty about what he thought, his disaffection expressed
so precisely that nothing remained unsaid. As the pages of his reply mounted, he occasionally
dashed off a letter to the CC, assuring them they would have their answers but requesting an
extra week or so to finish his response. ‘I will,’ he explained, ‘and at the first moment
practicable for me, give the Executive in writing, my deepest thoughts on the subjects in
question; but, if I am to do so, then the Executive, in turn, will have to give me the necessary
time to write my remaining answers with full truth, that is, in my own way.’

He strung out his deadline well into February 1940—and then handed over a book-length
bundle, nearly two hundred pages of closely reasoned text. As much as a response to the CC’s
dozen or so questions, the document represented the culmination of Guido’s years in the
party, a reclamation of the best communist traditions in the face of the CC’s petty tyrannies.

The leadership demanded to know why he hadn’t informed them about Rawling’s
deviations from the party line. ‘I did not bear tales about Rawling to the CC,’ he replied,
‘because I have never been able to acquire the psychology of the pimp, which may be in place
in organisations constructed along the lines of a police state, but is repugnant to working-class
organisations, and which is beneath the contempt of every healthy minded school-boy.’ As an
aside, he suggested, with bitter sarcasm, that the CC ‘find some other expression for the
wretched term, party “line”, which suggests either something to be toed or something to be
negotiated by a tight-rope walker, or even something to be sold as a commodity’.

They asked whether he knew Rawling intended breaking with the party.

‘Rawling did not “break with the party”,’ he wrote. ‘You threw him out. You threw him
out because … in the face of all material interest and personal association, he followed the
urge of his conscience to speak out what he was profoundly convinced was true. Is it so easy a
thing to stake all else for an idea—the comradships and friendships of years, to risk
exchanging them overnight for slander and persecution, to risk exchanging this for the
starvation to which he and his family are now exposed? Shame on Comrade Gowland [of the
CC], who said at the meeting I attended: “He can go to the Commonwealth Police” for a
living! All honour to Comrade Rawling, who loses so much else, but hearkens to the voice of
his conscience to “Speak out what is!”’

He recalled Docker’s comparatively fair-minded approach to Roper. ‘Yet how mad it
made Docker to hear me repeat this [to the CC members] instead of telling them that, at the
sight of Roper, he had frothed at the mouth like a dog with rabies! To what, then, are we
coming, Comrade Docker, that you need feel ashamed to have risen above the sub-human?’

Of necessity, he devoted considerable space to defending norms of party democracy, but
the real core of his document concerned the nature of the socialist project. After years of
justifying Stalin’s realpolitik, he returned to the revelation he’d first found in the New Age in
London so long ago, that numinous vision he and Lesbia saw in the Wobblies, a glimpse of
rough and ragged labourers and seamen shaping their own lives with their own hands. Of course, the regime in the Soviet Union, with its Five-Year Plans and engineering marvels, possessed a special attraction for technocrats and liberals who wanted, as he put it, to ‘live capitalism in Australia and dream socialism in the USSR’. But the earnest do-gooders, as instinctively drawn to Stalin’s unfettered power as the Fabians had been to the British state, knew nothing of a social emancipation that depended, not on Red aviators and Soviet tanks, nor even progressive capitalists and sympathetic archbishops, but on those Lesbia had called ‘the invisible people’: the men and women of the factories and the offices who could—if they but knew it—take control of a world that their labour, and their labour alone, created and recreated every day.

The Communist Party, like so many reformers before it, no longer believed in the capacities of the workers in whose name it spoke, for it accepted the towering presence of the Soviet Union as self-evidently greater than the million Lilliputian ropes of solidarity through which working people might collectively exert power. So what then remained of Marxism? Guido quoted his old friend Bertram Higgins to explain how, unless you believed that the tiny, everyday struggles in factories and offices could eventually transform the world, socialism would remain a dream, capitalism the reality:

And all that goes between is a wasting lie
That seduces the hopes of men in their twenties,
Betrays their naïve forces into empty pursuits
Until the attenuated hope they hug
Makes desperate, and then they are beyond fulfilment.

Against the Communist Party and the wasting lie it presented, he restated the fundamental point on which, he believed, the socialist project depended. ‘The workers,’ he argued, ‘are the gravediggers of capitalism, of imperialism. It is high time, in this country also, that they took up their spades and began to dig.’

With that, he mailed off his screed, a response so very different in form and in content from the standard Stalinist tract. Betty Roland sent her own letter: a much shorter document, and more directly to the point. The party, she said simply, was responsible for ‘the most damnable betrayal of working-class interests in the whole record of human history’—and she therefore wanted nothing to do with it.

‘Despite all my former associates may say or think,’ she concluded, ‘the triumph of the working class and the ultimate achievement of Socialism are the first considerations in my life. Therefore Stalin and his kind are an abomination.’

Her combative tone revealed how, far more than Guido, she’d already broken emotionally with the party. Her document constituted a resignation; his did not. Even with his manuscript
in the CC’s hands, he made one last attempt to talk with Dixon. He did not want to become the party’s enemy, he said. He would much rather fight for his ideas as a member, if they would let him.

That was never a possibility. On 21 February, Guido received his notice of expulsion. It declared him guilty of ‘adherence to Trotskyism, and associating with Trotskyists’, as well as ‘political and moral cowardice’. The CC’s brief statement appeared in the next edition of Tribune, the new communist paper. It complained that, rather than ‘simple straightforward replies to the questions asked’, Guido had produced an anti-party document.

‘He is,’ the CC declared, ‘a traitor to Socialism and an enemy of Soviet Russia.’

The charge of cowardice—a hastily tacked on smear—stung Guido into an immediate response, with an open letter to party members comparing his own political record with the far more cautious career of JB Miles. But few communists read it, since he was now a designated Trotskyist and all his statements were damned by association.

Besides, no leaflet could compete with the well-oiled slander machine that the party set into motion. Branch after branch held formal discussions of the renegades’ misdeeds and drew the requisite conclusions. On the Sydney waterfront, the wharfies—stalwarts of the party, staunch unionists and the heart of the working-class movement—declared they ‘absolutely endorsed the action of the CC in regard to the recent expulsions of Baracchi and Rawling … Forewarned is forearmed against these scum and we call on all for the greatest vigilance against them’.

In the Victorian country town of Camperdown, the rural communists agreed. ‘We have full confidence in the Central Committee,’ they resolved, ‘and commend its quick action in rooting out traitors within its ranks.’

That so many of the comrades knew and liked Guido meant only that the attacks became intensely personalised.

‘You may have met Guido,’ wrote the Tribune columnist Jack McCormack. ‘He has a ton of dough that some relative left him and a cultivated titter for which any debutante would barter her best friend’s reputation. [When] clouds of threatened repression began to gather around the party … the voice that has launched a thousand “rah rah rahs” and other college yells began to tremble a trifle.’

The Stalinists took their petty revenge on Betty by excising her plays from New Theatre but she’d already withdrawn, both psychologically and physically, from communist circles and so they were limited as to how they could hurt her. Guido was different. With practised efficiency, the leadership systematically visited his friends in the party, warning them to break contact with the Trotskyite renegade. Almost without exception, they obeyed.
Naïvely, Guido had not expected this. On the day of his expulsion, he’d sent a defiant telegram to Katharine Prichard. ‘STALINISM BETRAYAL OF LENINISM,’ he cabled. ‘SHOULD STILL BELIEVE IN ME NOT THOSE WHO FUNKED REGISTER BOYCOTT CONTINUING FULL LENINIST FIGHT AGAINST WAR AND FOR PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION AND SOVIET UNION SOMEHOW WILL TRY TO MAKE A COMMUNIST OF YOU LOVE GUIDO.’

But Katharine—his oldest comrade and one of the few survivors from the group that founded the party—didn’t want his love, much less his political opinions. She wanted, in fact, nothing to do with him, as she made clear. He was a wrecker, a fascist, an enemy of the working class and of Leninism, and it would be twenty-five years before they would again communicate.

In his first days outside the party, with the full meaning of his expulsion becoming clear, Guido suffered something akin to a nervous breakdown. He had anticipated the gangsterism of Sharkey and his team but the membership’s compliance stunned him and, for the first time since 1913, he teetered on the edge of disbelief. Since receiving Freda’s letter, he’d tried to explain—tentatively at first, but with more and more confidence—everything wrong both in the Soviet Union and the Australian party in Marxist terms. The doctrine hadn’t failed the communists; the communists had failed the doctrine. Far more than Betty or Jim, he’d harboured the bookish fantasy that an exposure of the party’s theoretical errors would, in and of itself, induce its members to re-examine and reconsider. The unruffled ease with which the leadership isolated and politically destroyed him shook him to his core. He understood the corruption of a leadership but his whole argument relied upon a faith in the rank and file. If the ordinary communist workers could be so easily duped, what did this mean for socialism?

How could he not wonder, when he read how the party’s Sutherland branch endorsed the expulsion of ‘Barrachi, Rowland and Rawlings’? The members knew so little of the rights and wrongs of the case they rendered all three names incorrectly. The Sunderland statement was, explicitly, a declaration of faith revelling in its blindness. ‘They have gone over to our class enemy,’ the branch resolved. ‘That is enough for us.’

During his first trip to Europe, Guido had fashioned his Fabianism into a humanist theology and, though Marxism had sharpened the argument, the core remained the same. If workers were destined merely to act as the pawn of a Menzies or a Miles, then socialism signified nothing, for analysis and action constituted only different phases of the same process. Without the hope that humans could consciously, democratically and collectively shape a future, Guido was left with only a cold, dead universe: a cosmos of brute matter where mankind controlled nothing and civilisations rose and fell, advanced and collapsed, and none of it meant a damn.
He ceased to shave, he ceased to wash and sat motionless in his pyjamas on the veranda of his house, staring emptily into the distance, while the accusations of treason and betrayal mounted unanswered.

It was only the momentum of activism that pulled him to his feet, as a battered boxer might shape up instinctively for the bell. He’d promised the Trotskyists to speak on their stump and he dragged himself from his torpor simply to keep his word. Betty convinced him to scrub himself up before they made their way together onto the Domain, a landscape suddenly transformed by their exclusion from the party. The familiar faces they met were distorted with hostility, warning a pair of Trotsky-fascists away from a workers’ forum, and it was strange and a little frightening to pass the CPA platform and see the eyes of their old comrades narrowed with loathing.

JB Miles’ Scottish burr floated across the crowd as they walked by:

‘Baracchi … pseudo-Marxist … agent of Menzies!’

When they reached the Communist League stump they found Gil Roper in full flight before a crowd of several hundred. Roper belonged to the old school of oratory, with the declamatory thunder he’d learned from many years on the soapbox. He spoke about the war, about the killings that had been and the killings that were to come, and the falsity of the justifications made for them.

A fight for democracy, the bosses said, a struggle against Nazism. But the capitalists cared nothing for stopping the Nazis, while the democratic rights they trumpeted were everywhere disappearing. The fight against fascism began right here in Australia, with the struggle against conscription. There was no need to stick a bayonet into the belly of a German worker in the name of Bob Menzies!

Not all the audience were supportive—there was a sprinkling of khaki uniforms amongst them—but Guido could see the occasional nod of the head and the quickened interest that showed an idea had taken root.

How familiar it all was! If he shut his eyes, he was back on the Yarra Bank with Lesbia and the IIW, in the days when rough Wobbly humour cut down would-be apparatchiks of the Sharkey mould and no one imagined socialism could include show trials and labour camps.

This was what it was about. You could not blame the workers for the betrayals that had taken place. The Comintern possessed an army of slanderers, spreading their confusion everywhere they could. But Roper spoke the truth, and events themselves would confirm what he said.

‘Trotsky-fascist … dilettante!’

He remembered a passage from *Finnegans Wake* and felt both Stalin and his local supporters slide back into perspective. ‘I thought,’ Joyce wrote, ‘you were all glittering with
the noblest of carriage. You're only a bumpkin. I thought you the great in all things, in guilt and in glory. You're but a puny.’

He could almost pity Miles, condemned to senselessly repeat Moscow’s lies. The CPA hacks—part-gangster, part-gramophone, as Orwell put it—praised Stalin’s un-scrupulousness. What did they know of revolution? How did Luxemburg phrase it, when she spoke of the feeling for humanity that constituted the essence of socialism? ‘A world must be overturned,’ she said, ‘but every tear that flows and might have been staunched is an accusation, and a man hurrying to a great deed who knocks down a child out of unfeeling carelessness commits a crime.’

The terrible sense of loss lifted. When his turn came to speak, he stepped, almost joyously, onto the platform.
War Again
‘Too many dogs are Liberals!’

For a few months, everything seemed possible. Jack Kavanagh came across to the League, too, and he, Guido and Betty explained to packed crowds in the WEA hall why they’d broken with Stalin. On the Domain, the clarity of the Trotskyists compensated for their size (just thirty-three members in Sydney; a pitiful twelve in Melbourne) and their orators could match anything the CPA threw against them.

In mid-April, angry soldiers attacked the league stump, forcing its speakers to flee. Much to the horror of his companions, Guido worried more about the duco on his car than his physical safety. ‘Hey! Watch the paintwork!’ he yelled, as the escaping comrades threw the wooden rostrum onto the vehicle’s roof and clambered on board. It was more than bravado. He remembered the jingo hooligans of Mirboo North—and how, a few months later, anti-conscriptionists carried the day. A khaki mob only foreshadowed the future, and the gang that harassed the league rather than the CPA stump simply confirmed the Trotskyists’ claim as the revolution’s rightful heirs.

The only cloud on the bright socialist horizon concerned Jim Rawling. Jim had fully intended to join the Trotskyists, but in the weeks Guido took to prepare his document, he hesitated. ‘Does socialism mean death to tens of millions?’ Jim asked himself. ‘Does it mean concentration camps and the killing of all opponents, dissident and dissatisfied elements? … Does it mean the metamorphosis of a low-brow Georgian into a demi-god?’ The abuse heaped upon him sent his hatred of Stalinism swelling and surging beyond the narrow banks in which he sought to confine it. In an article for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he hinted at a disillusionment not just with the CPA but with Marxism itself and, when league members queried him, he accused them, quite unjustly, of a Stalinist inquisition.

‘I must confess,’ he wrote, ‘at the present time, I see very little fundamental difference between yourselves and the CP.’

He’d slipped his radical moorings and, in a matter of months, he sailed into the waters of conventional anti-communism, where he stayed for the rest of his life. It was a phenomenon with which Guido would become depressingly familiar. He didn’t blame Jim, for whom he retained a deep affection. The revolutionary channel the Trotskyists navigated was narrow, with Stalinism pressing on one side, and the capitalists hard against the other, and many
foundered on the passage. The league was small—so very, very small—and its maintenance took a terrible toll on its adherents. A few years earlier, Edna Ryan had commented to Hig on the problems facing the Workers Party when Ted Tripp led it.

‘Poor Tripp looks grey and old,’ she wrote. ‘The difficulties confronting the WP are too much for me to share—Tripp will die in the best possible cause.’

Tripp didn’t die but he moved to Melbourne and the leadership passed to Nick Origlass, a man in many ways cast from the same mould. Origlass was a self-educated metal-worker who, like most of the league’s members, spent an apprenticeship in the Communist Party before graduating to Trotskyism. He possessed the confidence, the bloody-minded resolve, to keep a tiny group functioning in a world sometimes indifferent and more often hostile, and his broad shoulders shrugged off attacks by Stalinists and employers alike. If his determination teetered occasionally into arrogance and if intolerance sometimes tinged his self-assurance, under the circumstances these failings were not, perhaps, so surprising.

In the early months of the war, Origlass and his comrades possessed every reason for hope. Workers remembered the Great War and its millions of dead; few shared Menzies’ enthusiasm for a new European conflict. In the Domain’s weekly political theatre, Trotskyism invariably acquitted itself well, with its more consistent and hard-hitting anti-war platform. Gil Roper demanded that soldiers elect their officers, the ponderous but unstoppable Origlass thundered out Trotsky’s carefully formulated slogans and Kavanagh, white-haired and distinguished, methodically reduced hecklers to incoherence.

But circumstances blighted the radical seeds the Trotskyists so confidently sowed. Billy Hughes, the Prime Minister of conscription days, now served Menzies as Attorney-General and, in May 1940, he banned the league’s newspaper the *Militant*, alongside eight communist publications. In June, the Communist Party itself became illegal. A week later, the Director of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch advised similar measures against the league. ‘It cannot be said to have a very big following at the present time,’ he told Hughes, ‘but if it intends (as it probably will) to exploit the fact that the Communist Party of Australia has been declared unlawful, it may grow to dimensions likely to cause a lot of trouble.’

Once more, Guido belonged to an unlawful organisation. Though not particularly severe, Hughes’ measures sent three Trotskyists to gaol for campaigning against the war. As an elementary security precaution, the comrades gave themselves party aliases—Guido called himself ‘Barker’—and Jack Kavanagh secured the branch minutes behind a loose stone in the wall of his house. Ken Gee, a young lawyer, remembered how, at their illegal gatherings, ‘Comrade Barker would quote … Marx in his hesitant way, like some lecturing pedant whose bulging brain was too much for his vocal chords. We were all very proud of our Guido, who could reproduce word-perfectly any given page of the sacred texts’.
The two wartime raids on the Castlecrag household constituted more an annoyance than a real threat. Guido was away at a meeting the first time they came and Betty, her enthusiasm for Trotskyism already dwindling, dealt with the police alone. ‘I looked out the window,’ she recalled, ‘and there were two men in trench coats at the rear door and two men in trench coats at the front door.’ The police searched the house, confiscated a mixed assortment of contraband (a printing block, some stickers, three theatre magazines and twenty copies of the Communist Review) and vanished, taking with them Betty’s contract for a Soviet performance of The Touch of Silk, simply because it was written in Russian. Guido, upon his return, could not hide a certain peevishness about missing the excitement.

Illegality didn’t crush the league but it made recruitment more difficult. The Trotskyists could not sell a paper, they could not speak in their own name and the subterfuges they adopted inevitably slowed their momentum.

Then, in August 1940, a Stalinist hitman infiltrated Trotsky’s fortified hacienda in Mexico to smash an axe into his brain. It was not altogether unexpected: seven of his secretaries and four of his children had already been killed, and Trotsky always knew that Stalin’s assassins would eventually reach him. But, predictable or not, the death of its founder left the Trotskyist movement severely weakened.

Betty and Guido were on holidays when they heard the news, and a deep gloom settled over them both. Guido rushed back to Sydney to deliver the address at a Trotsky memorial meeting. ‘I was barely eight years old when Engels died,’ he told a surprisingly large crowd. ‘The deaths of Luxemburg and Lenin stirred me deeply but I confess that Trotsky’s tragic end has moved me most of all. Yet I recall his words: “Let him who wishes weep bitter tears because history moves ahead so perplexingly: two steps forward, one step back. But tears are of no avail. It is necessary, according to Spinoza’s advice, not to laugh, not to weep, but to understand.”’

Murder squads killing the leaders of October provided, he said, one more proof of the awful degeneration of a revolution that had promised to liberate humanity. Corpses beyond number separated Stalinism from Marxism, and socialists had no alternative but to create a new tradition, untainted by death camps and falsifications and corruption. Even though Hitler and Stalin darkened the globe, Marxism would still triumph. ‘The victorious advance of modern barbarism,’ he said, ‘will presently reach its limits, and then the movement to social progress and human liberty will set in afresh.’

He couldn’t even convince Betty. She had greatly admired Trotsky, the last titan of classical Marxism, and she sensed the importance of the connection with him in differentiating the Communist League from all the other dissidents and dreamers sloughed off from official communism during its slow decomposition. Mortally wounded, Trotsky had
urged his followers to continue. ‘Tell our friends I am sure of the victory of the Fourth International,’ he whispered. ‘Go forward!’ Betty no longer believed it possible.

‘The icepick that went into Trotsky’s brain went into the heart of the Trotskyist movement,’ she said, and she turned her attention to Gilda, and the state of her relationship with Guido.

There was much to worry about. Their sex life had entirely broken down, leading Betty to conclude that Guido’s interests simply lay elsewhere. She had no trouble identifying the likely object of his desires. Ula had also resigned from the CPA, with a series of accusatory letters to the CC. She followed the affairs of the league very closely; she and Guido continued to spend long, intimate hours together.

In early 1941, Betty learned that Ula had obtained a divorce, leaving her legally free to pursue Guido. The news forced Betty to think of her own position. She no longer felt confident in Guido’s love. If he abandoned her, where would she go? How would she live? She thought again of Justus Jorgensen. Perhaps his Montsalvat would be her salvation. Guido, keen to visit the beleaguered Victorian comrades, was easily convinced to journey down to Melbourne. The Attorney-General duly received a tip-off that ‘a Mr and Mrs Barrachi [sic] … have formed some kind of colony at Eltham’, with the anonymous informant warning that ‘a number of people, presumably communists, live in huts near the Eltham cemetery … and are at present occupied in erecting a tabernacle’.

In reality Guido, Betty and Gilda lived, for some weeks, in a simple caravan under a shady tree. Jorgensen’s devotees had shaped a cluster of mud brick houses around a mediaeval-style great hall, in which they gathered each evening for food and wine and philosophical debate. Since the break with the party, Castlecrag had been lonely, especially for Betty, and it was a relief to plunge into a communal life crowded with artists, writers and free-thinkers.

During their stay, Guido rushed each morning into the city to liaise with two young men from the Communist League’s Melbourne branch. Laurie Short—a ‘small, nuggetty, effervescent young man with tow-coloured hair and a bouncy walk’—had been recruited to Marxism by Hig, and turned to Trotskyism in 1933, aged only seventeen.

‘I’m greatly impressed with Shorty,’ Edna Ryan wrote. ‘He is … the most promising bloke I’ve seen for years.’

Short lived with Jim McClelland, another dazzling recruit to the socialist cause. Unlike Short, McClelland had been to university, and took to the factory floor out of Marxist conviction rather than material need. He admired Trotsky as a sparkling prose stylist, a historic figure who lived and died on a heroic scale. Convinced by his reading, McClelland threw himself gamely into revolutionary struggle, but his delight in Marxism’s explanatory power was accompanied by a certain condescension towards the workers he sought to
enlighten. He studied the Trotskyist material on the Moscow Trials and thereafter, he said, ‘could never regard a Stalinist as anything but intellectually retarded or cynically indifferent to the politics of murder’. However understandable, his attitude ignored the real reasons why his workmates might cleave to a party with a track record of struggle rather than joining a tiny group armed merely with good ideas, and it hinted at McClelland’s own underlying impatience.

Guido set about cultivating Jim’s theoretical abilities with an extensive reading list. ‘[Guido] more than anybody else opened the doors to my Marxist education,’ wrote McClelland, ‘which I undertook as seriously as any university course.’ Their relationship (and, to a lesser extent, that of Guido and Short) reprised the almost fatherly connection Guido had forged with the Labour Club a decade or so earlier. Melbourne’s two foremost Trotskyists were still only in their twenties and, though the Communist League provided them with exhilarating philosophies, its marginality constrained their activities to a frustratingly small orbit. In Guido, they saw the possibility of wider vistas. They knew of his history in the movement; they admired and envied his casual erudition, his familiarity with culture and the arts.

‘He was,’ said McClelland, ‘one of the few people I had met who could afford to be a principled and undeviating socialist and that’s what, for all his comfortable life style and bohemian preferences, he always held himself out to be.’

Short followed Guido out to Montsalvat where he flirted with the women at dinner, drank too much wine and fell into the swimming pool. Forced to borrow a pair of velvet trousers, he worried whether he looked like ‘a bit of a pansy’, but still had sufficiently good a time to return a few days later with McClelland in train—only to be abruptly banished by Jorgensen, enraged that the two Trotskyists had joined the communal banquet without his imprimatur.

Betty, in contrast, enjoyed Short’s visit and registered Jorgensen’s petty authoritarianism with dismay. His little kingdom possessed its charms—it brought them, for instance, back in touch with the Palmers, who occasionally visited, and Neura and Mike, who lived nearby—but she decided she could not stay. Jorgensen himself she found unbearable: a pretentious martinet who taunted her over the assassination of Trotsky, a subject which, despite her withdrawal from politics, she still found unbearably sad. She mentally classified Jorgensen with ‘the Aunt Belles and the Bob Menzieses and all the other stinking reactionaries who haven’t the least inkling of what really lies at the base of the bloody mess of Stalinism’.

Jorgensen explained his dominion over the gathered artists in simple terms. ‘There’s nothing to compel you or anybody else to stay here,’ he said, ‘but while you’re here, you’ll obey me.’

It was, of course, the same argument the Stalinists used, and Betty found it no more attractive in Montsalvat than in Sydney. ‘I had been prepared to accept the discipline and
negation of self the Communist Party demanded,’ she wrote, ‘because it had appeared to
represent a great ideal but Jorgensen appeared to have no ideal greater than the promotion of
himself and to that I could not subscribe.’

She packed up the caravan and went back to Castlecrag, where Guido joined her a few
weeks later. The uncertainty in their relationship remained.

In Sydney, the news from the front had become far more serious, with the phoney conflict
of the first months giving way to a total war between millions of people all over the globe.
With victory uncertain and a Japanese invasion not impossible, anti-war arguments met a
newly sceptical response. The Trotskyists continued to argue for the power of ordinary people
over the might of the generals. They recognised the danger of fascism but they didn’t trust the
anti-fascist credentials of the military caste. General Blamey, the leader of the Australian
forces, had himself organised a secret fascist army during the thirties. General MacArthur,
soon to command US troops in Australia, regarded democracy as ‘mobocracy, demagogism,
licence, agitation, discontent, anarchy’. Such men had scorned civil rights during peacetime.
They would scarcely defend them during a war.

A conflict led by the wealthy and the privileged would, said the Communist League, be
long and brutal, with each side legitimately pointing to the greed and duplicity of the other. If,
on the other hand, Australians deposed their own militarists, they would provide an example
for workers in Japan and Germany—just as the Russian revolution of 1917 inspired mutinies
in Berlin the next year. Only a few years earlier, Spain and its anti-fascist militias had
electrified the world. That was why the Trotskyists called for a democratised army, and an
industry nationalised under workers’ control.

The government’s strategy relied on rallying the nation with the rhetoric of White
Australia. ‘We’ve always despised them!’ explained its advertising campaign of the Japanese.
‘Now we must smash them!’ In the place of racism, the Communist League called on the
workers of the world to unite.

‘We are the people who build,’ read its manifesto. ‘We can build up everything that is
destroyed. We know the miracles that can be achieved by an armed people. We remember
Madrid, Moscow, Leningrad. You say you want maximum production. You, in subservience
to the banks, have sabotaged Australian production for scores of years … Let the federal
government nationalise the war industries and let them be controlled by shop committees of
the workers. Then from your huge profits the workers will get proper conditions and there
will be uninterrupted maximum production.’

Naïve? Perhaps—but a naïvety consistent with the socialist dream, and a belief in the
lowest orders’ ability to make their own history.

Of course, few heard the slogans. In a time of crisis, most workers wanted not rhetoric but
results, and results were something the Trotskyists simply could not deliver. Then Germany
attacked the Soviet Union, and the Communist Party turned from opposing the war to promoting it, so that, in workplaces throughout Australia, communist activists transformed, almost overnight, from anti-war agitators to super-patriots who condemned strikes and strained to increase production.

In a negative sense, Stalinist policy confirmed the internal logic of the league’s position. The pro-war stance forced communists to embrace the most conservative elements of society, the very people they had spent decades denouncing: the generals, the businessmen and the politicians. Yet with CP militants urging social unity, the space for a radical opposition shrank perilously. From the middle of 1941, the Trotskyists stood alone against both the capitalists and the best-known activists of the trade unions.

As fascism advanced and the Stalinists tightened their hegemony in the workers’ movement, it was easy to despair of social progress. In Melbourne, one of the leading Trotskyists told his friends he was going away for a few weeks, retreated to his office and quietly swallowed some poison.

In Castlecrag, Betty also lost heart, but for different reasons. Across Sydney, parents were banding together to hide their children from a possible Japanese attack. Betty arranged for Gilda to accompany Ula and her daughter Deirdre to a farmhouse in the Megalong Valley in the Blue Mountains. Alone with Guido in Castlecrag, she made a last attempt to mend their relationship.

‘I love you, Guido, and I need you,’ she told him. ‘What have I done that you don’t want me any more?’

‘Betsy darling, you’ve done nothing. Nothing at all.’

‘Then, why don’t you make love to me?’

He struggled for words, intense sadness in his face. ‘I can’t explain.’

Defeated by his silence, she shrank back from the relationship. She would, she decided, take a lover. With the city full of lonely soldiers, it was not difficult. A good-looking serviceman struck up a conversation over lunch. They spent the afternoon talking and she didn’t come home until well into the evening.

When she returned, Guido was reading in bed. He lowered his book and said: ‘I was beginning to worry about you. What happened?’

‘I had dinner with a soldier.’

‘An American?’

‘No. An Australian.’

‘I’m glad of that. Is he a nice bloke?’

‘Very. I’m going to spend tomorrow night with him.’

‘Are you, Betsy?’
He expressed no resentment, just surprise and a muted sorrow that melted Betty’s own anger. She didn’t change her mind but, the next day, on the way to her date, she rang home at the last moment.

‘Guido, do you understand that I’m going to spend the night with him?’
‘Yes, Betsy, I understand.’

There was nothing more that could be said. Their union was over.

The next day, Guido slept with Ula for the first time. When he told Betty, she was incredulous—she had thought their sexual relationship stretched back since Gilda’s birth.

‘You mean to say that you’ve kept her waiting all this time?’
‘I was waiting for you.’
‘Waiting for what? For me to get another man?’
‘For you to be strong enough to get along without me.’

He wanted to leave, he told her. He wanted to live with Ula.

‘You realise what it means?’ Betty asked. ‘You’ll lose Gilda and me.’

‘Price beyond measure, Betsy dear.’

In the end, despite Betty’s deep pain, their separation proved remarkably civilised. Betty had known Ula for so many suspicious years that her jealousy had subsided into tolerance and then a reciprocal affection, not unlike the bond that she’d formed with Neura.

‘Before I knew and loved you, I’d have given my life for what has now come to pass,’ Ula wrote, when she heard of Betty’s confrontation with Guido. ‘Please come soon. I want to talk with you … I want to feel secure in your friendship.’

The friendship remained and their three-way companionship continued, even after Guido and Ula moved together into a Kings Cross flat: a sparse apartment with bare floor boards and a cockroach infestation, looking down over Darlinghurst Road. Betty stayed in Castlecrag, where she experimented with a series of short-term relationships. Guido visited her regularly, even though his attentiveness made her miss him even more. Betty and Ula helped each other with their children and, when Ula and Guido moved into a fibro cottage in Newport (conveniently close to the Workers Educational Association summer school, at which Guido regularly lectured), Betty stayed over during her regular visits to Gilda. It was a house full of activity and discussion where the Brown Bros red wine flowed as freely as the conversation.

For a time, Guido and Ula looked after both Gilda and Deirdre, who saw each other almost as sisters. ‘Gilda is lovely as a flower,’ said Ula to Betty. ‘So eager, eating well, and merry and mischievous and adorable.’ Gilda enjoyed the time with her father. He drove Deirdre and Gilda in his little car into a roundabout and refused to leave, turning endlessly in circles while they screamed with laughter. He teased them with his eccentricities, laughing and singing down the street while they watched, half-appalled, half-delighted. He returned from sticking up posters on trees and solemnly told them he’d accidentally plastered one over
an owl, which had gone flying off carrying its revolutionary message into the night. He walked them along the beaches, teaching Gilda long division and Deirdre a Wordsworth sonnet and taking them out for fish and chips and fried eggs. But he could never be relied upon for the kind of regular, reliable parenting that Betty provided.

Setting up home with Ula stretched Guido’s finances to the limit. Before he’d gone to Russia, he’d transferred all his assets to Neura, who’d divorced him in 1938. He was now very strapped for cash, occasionally putting possessions into hock until the next cheque from the Petty estate arrived. Ula worked as a home nurse and in a milk bar, while Guido accepted an unlikely post as a van driver for a biscuit company. As well as providing much needed income, the job accorded with the league’s policy of implanting its cadre in industry.

Ken Gee recalled Guido as a somewhat less than successful driver (‘His driving being as hesitant as his eloquence, he had wrecked the mudguards of the biscuit trucks one by one, until the wretched Management had begged Manpower to take him away’), but he kept the position until the end of the war, hating every minute of it. He told Jim Rawling in October 1945 that ‘after three years, on and off, I’m definitely out of my job at last, thank God! But in such low financial water, I’ll likely have to seek another, curse it!’

During the later war years, Roper and Origlass, desperate to break the Trotskyists out of their cul-de-sac, proposed a new strategy. If the working class wouldn’t come to the revolutionaries, the revolutionaries would go to the working class, dissolving their own organisation and moving as a body into the ALP, where they could proselytise before a wider audience while awaiting the Labor radicalisation they expected the war’s aftermath to bring.

The idea appealed to Guido. He’d argued for something not altogether dissimilar in 1925 and, in the debate within the league, he came down decisively behind Origlass. Others, including Jack Kavanagh, disagreed. The smallness of the group meant that discontented members could see little to lose in starting their own organisation, so those who opposed entering the Labor Party broke away and declared themselves the Revolutionary Workers Party, while Origlass’ supporters renamed themselves the Labor Socialist Group.

The Stalinists, predictably but not without justification, sneered that two Trotskyists in a room would declare themselves a party—and three would engineer a split.

Still, by the end of the war there was reason to think that Trotskyism’s star might at last be in the ascendant. Nick Origlass had been employed as an ironworker at Morts Dock since 1939. Though the Stalinists largely controlled the Federated Ironworkers Association, he became a boiler shop union delegate in 1942, and he sat on a raft of union committees.

Because the LSG supported popular mobilisations to defeat fascism, it backed every struggle for better pay and conditions, not simply for their own sake, but because even such economic campaigns prepared workers for greater things. The CPA’s support for the war entailed a contrary logic. The generals would save the nation—and ordinary people need only
stop complaining and work harder. The Morts Dock ironworkers might not have been ready to form workers’ militias, but they resented the employers’ attempts to work them harder for less pay. To them, Ernie Thornton, the Stalinist union leader, often sounded more like an old-style manager than an apostle of socialism.

‘There is one man who is a metho drinker and who is never sober,’ Thornton said. ‘We should not wait for the boss to sack these people but we should sack them ourselves.’ In 1943, the CPA newsletter Rivet published an article in which a young Stalinist complained about the slowness of his elderly co-workers and called on management to speed up production. It caused outrage amongst unionists, who had been fighting for years to protect seniority, and Origlass’ reply in his broadsheet Socialist was widely read.

The battle between the members in Balmain (where Laurie Short soon joined Origlass) and the union head office waxed and waned over several years. But in 1945, thousands of workers went on strike against Stalinist attempts to remove Origlass as union delegate. The CP’s unionists rehearsed all the old canards about Trotsky-fascists, even appealing to the government to intervene, but the men backed Origlass, who succeeded in capturing the entire Balmain branch of the FIA.

Guido played no role in a struggle fought out in the metalwork shops but he followed it keenly. The dispute crystallised the principled differences between the Trotskyists and the Communist Party: Origlass and his comrades stood for rank-and-file democracy and militancy; the Stalinists sought to restrain the men by bureaucratic manoeuvring.

With the contrast so clear, it seemed perfectly feasible to expect the LSG to bound forward into the post-war world. But these high expectations served only to make the schism that followed more miserable and more dispiriting.

It began with Guido’s protégé, Jim McClelland, who had spent most of the war on Bathurst Island working in a radar station. With him went the three volumes of Capital that Guido had given him, and he devoted ten months to working his way systematically through them. Yet he ‘never discovered in Marx’s formulae and dialectical analysis the conclusive proofs which I had been led to expect of the inexorable unworkability of the capitalist system’. As he moved from Bathurst to New Guinea and back to Darwin, he conducted a long distance argument with Guido over the fundamentals of Marxist economics. Guido, he later said, failed to respond to the questions he raised, and could not answer his critique of Marx.

‘Guido, despite his abundant charm,’ he wrote, ‘was a bit of an old charlatan.’

McClelland presented his disenchantment as an intellectual rejection of Marx the philosopher. On a more profound level, he was reacting to the failure of Trotskyism to grow. The Communist Party—the local representative of the mighty Red Army—had emerged from the war enormously strengthened. Worse, when the guns ceased, the CP’s re-discovered
militancy isolated the Trotskyists further since, with both organisations talking about fighting the bosses, workers naturally gravitated to the larger. The CPA claimed some 20,000 members; the LSG numbered just twenty-six.

McClelland looked at the prospects ahead with infinite weariness. He’d dreamed of trampling on kings; he faced instead endless dreary committee meetings. He was thirty-one years old, an ex-serviceman with no marketable qualifications. He wanted a legal career but ‘I was acutely conscious that I had given my generation a ten-year start in the career stakes. I was ideologically pure but penniless’.

Very soon, Short confessed similar doubts about the LSG’s prospects. ‘In all the time I was a Trotskyist,’ he later wrote, ‘no more than fifty people in Australia saw the light. I began to wonder whether the evils of capitalism and its overthrow were all that inevitable.’

The industrial upsurge of the late forties provoked a sustained counterattack by the Right, led by a new breed of ideological anti-communists within the unions and the Labor Party. These Cold Warriors offered a fresh alternative for young revolutionaries despairing of revolution—not only McClelland and Short but Ken Gee and his friend John Kerr, the future Governor-General. Marxism had given them a suspicion of the motives of politicians and statesmen, and a nose for the material reality behind fine phrases and orotund cant. Their ability to understand the world all too easily became a tendency to see through it, and they found the cynicism of the Labor Right more appealing than the muddled idealism of the Labor Left.

But revolutionary training could be put to work for the Labor Right only when stripped of its liberatory trappings—and that meant settling accounts with the past. McClelland could convince himself that Origlass—indifferent to music, ignorant of art—was a simple-minded boor. But what about Guido?

His relationship with Guido trembled with Oedipal anxiety. During the last years of the war, Jim had even embarked on an affair with Betty Roland, which resumed when he returned to Sydney in 1946, though she complained that, as a lover, he ‘showed a preference for conducting a polemic with Guido on the theories of Karl Marx when he should have been paying attention to me’. Before they broke up, Jim declared his love for Betty, and said he’d have married her—if only she were ten years younger.

McClelland never published his critique of Marx, and we have only his word both for its sagacity and Guido’s inability to respond. ‘I concluded that [Guido’s] reputation,’ he said, ‘had been based on the fact that in his time as an unchallenged Marxist guru either nobody within his circle of influence had read Capital or those who had done so had not understood it.’ Given the calibre of people Guido had worked with, this was a ridiculous claim—but it
allowed Jim to retreat, secure that the movement had failed him, rather than the other way round.

The content of their dispute mattered less than its form. Because for McClelland, Guido represented Marxism’s potential, their clash—a Freudian primal murder—was necessary to allow the birth of ‘Diamond Jim’, an activist and aesthete of the Labor Right. By settling scores with his mentor, McClelland could become the Guido he envied, sufficiently stripped of embarrassing radicalism to evolve, remarkably quickly, into a dashing industrial relations lawyer and, later, a minister in the Whitlam government.

Laurie Short followed a similar path, becoming, without his Marxism, the key opponent of the Stalinists in the union. With the backing of BA Santamaria’s Movement, which lent the authority of the Catholic church to the anti-communist struggle, he ascended to the national leadership of the Ironworkers in 1951 and turned the union into an impenetrable fortress for the Right of the ALP. Ken Gee ascended the ranks of the legal profession, and from high judicial office he penned for Quadrant an account of a ‘Trotskyite Boyhood’, replete with McClelland-like condescension for his ex-comrades.

Yet, in the midst of his scorn, he hesitated.

‘Rereading this memoir,’ he wrote, ‘I wonder whether I have done justice to the Central Committee of the Revolutionary Workers Party [sic]. I neither want to diminish the virtues nor exaggerate the vices of my former comrades. I would not want to set them up as figures of fun …’

Did the moment of hesitation hint at a grudging admiration of those who stuck with Trotskyism, despite the odds against them? Origlass might have been, as McClelland described him, a ‘large, slow-moving, slow-thinking, slow-talking man’, but the path he took, in trying to keep an anti-Stalinist Marxism alive, possessed its own stubborn nobility—and Gee, all those years later, could perhaps still sense it.

The LSG survived the defection of its dynamic younger members but it was reduced to a rump and, in a deeply conservative decade, found itself more isolated than ever before.

Furthermore, McClelland and Short were right to suggest Trotskyism faced a theoretical crisis, even if its problems related less to Marx’s economics than to the advances of Stalin. The Trotskyists had steadfastly condemned Stalin’s barbarities as a betrayal of all that 1917 represented. The post-war regimes established in Eastern Europe and Mao’s victory in China posed the question anew. What was socialism? The new communist nations emerged with almost no participation from the workers themselves, and barely any pretence of democracy. So what were they? As the world polarised between two great blocs, with militarism and authoritarianism on both sides, where, exactly, did Trotskyism fit in?
The renewed vitality of the local communists complicated the question anew. The Red Army had overcome tremendous odds to stop Hitler’s advance in Russia, and its success convinced many to join the Communist Party. It seemed the only viable option for reformers seeking a more dynamic alternative to the ALP, and it led struggles over everything from equal pay to Aboriginal rights.

‘It didn’t matter what happened,’ recalled one communist activist of the fifties, ‘if some school committee hit the headlines, you could bet your life, there’d be some Communist Party member at the school, and he’d be organising. I used to pick up the paper when I was a Communist Party organiser and I’d be amazed; I’d see all these issues and I knew someone who’d be running them.’

Yet if the party still contained the best militants, the Marxism it promulgated had thickened and darkened and soured into a discourse unrecognisable as the limpid doctrines into which Guido had gazed at Andrade’s. Lysenko, the charlatan of genetics, provided communists with their line on science; the vulgar philistine Zhdanov dictated their views on literature. Behind both sat the Generalissimo Stalin whose authority on matters of theory rested neither on scholarship nor intellect, but on one of the most extensive networks of repression the world had ever seen.

‘The suggestions of Comrade Stalin are a law for everybody,’ said one speaker at a conference of Russian writers—and who would dare disagree?

Counterposing Marx to Stalin, the Trotskyists kept a different tradition alive—but only just.

The LSG responded to the conservatism of the Cold War by burying itself ever deeper inside the ALP. Entrism had been conceived as a temporary tactic, intended to bring the revolutionaries in contact with the radicalising masses, but it became a long-term strategy, with the Origlass faction eventually abandoning its paper and submerging much of its public face within the Labor Party. The flame of Marxism continued to flicker but, entombed within the ALP, it could never catch fire. Isolated from the workers’ movement, beleaguered from the Left and from the Right, the Trotskyists’ critical edge lost some of its sharpness. They never reconciled themselves to Stalinism, but they clung to Trotsky’s critique of Russia as a workers’ state in the process of degeneration, even as Mao began making his own contribution to Stalin’s bounty of skulls.

‘The worst sin of a revolutionary,’ Lenin once wrote, ‘is to be over fifty.’ After World War Two, the movement desperately required a fresh approach, the kind of paradigm shift Guido had championed when Leninism arrived to unsettle the certainties of the Victorian Socialist Party and the Wobblies. But by 1950, Guido was sixty-three—and probably no longer psychologically capable of leading such a reorientation.
In any case, he’d been struck down by love again, with a new and violent passion that dominated the rest of his life. It was, in many ways, a familiar story. ‘I can’t explain it,’ he said. ‘I just fell in love with her and it’s something stronger than myself.’ This time, his infatuation was for a Castlecrag artist called Ethel Carson, a sensitive, slight woman, softly spoken, with long reddish-fair hair falling down around her shoulders, whose seeming fragility concealed a steely inner strength. Like Guido himself, she possessed a talent for friendships and he knew at once that he wanted to be with her.

His infatuation utterly devastated Ula, who developed a violent skin rash and shook with misery when the relationship fell apart. Betty had become very close to Ula and she saw this fresh betrayal as an abandonment not only of Ula but of her and Gilda, too. ‘Every remaining particle of regard that I had felt for Guido was gone,’ she wrote, ‘and I saw him for the first time as the flawed man that he was.’

In other circumstances, the affair might have been the desperate attempt of an ageing family man to recapture the passion of youth. For Guido, the infatuation with Ethel—who later became known as Victoria—represented not a departure from his early life but its continuation for, as with each of his earlier relationships, his love overwhelmed him, washing away everything else. Ula, Gilda, his political commitments—they all fell into second place. He moved from Newport back to Castlecrag and then he and Victoria headed over to Europe.

For the next few years, they lived as footloose expatriates in Greece, Paris, Sicily, Malaga and Rome. Their travels allowed Victoria to pursue her painting (she took art classes in Paris and began to experiment with more abstract styles), but they also facilitated an escape from an Australia sunk into Cold War anti-communism. In 1955, they returned for eighteen months or so but found the prospects so grim they quickly went back again to Europe. Wanda Spathopoulos, another Castlecrag resident whose friendship with Victoria and Guido grew when she joined them overseas, remembered them as a warm and generous couple.

‘When I went to London,’ she recalled, ‘I rang them and immediately they said, oh, we must see you today, tomorrow morning we are going to Spain. Here I was, a stranger in a strange land and they took me to an English pub, gave me something to drink, provided me with refreshments, everything lovely, and then they’d got an extra seat to the Spanish ballet they were going to that night, and we all went … I loved Victoria and I loved Guido.’

Guido delighted in Victoria’s art, providing the program notes when she exhibited in Europe. She was not, however, intimidated by Guido and was willing to stand up to him. ‘I think Victoria was the woman for Guido,’ concluded Deirdre, Ula Maddocks’ daughter. ‘She was a strong woman, mentally, though not physically … She used to shout at Guido in a way that my mother would never have done.’

Certainly, by the early sixties, Victoria still mattered so much that Guido was prepared to sever all links with his family on her behalf. He wanted to marry her; he could only do so if
Ula granted a divorce. Ula consulted Betty, who worried that a fresh marriage might endanger Gilda. If Victoria became Guido’s legal heir, his daughter might be left in the cold.

‘I am not going on with it,’ Ula told Guido. ‘Gilda is my immediate consideration.’

He responded with cold fury. He replied to Betty: ‘Don’t you realise that when two people are indivisible, like [Victoria] and me, I am bound to find this unforgivable?’ Unless she would convince Ula to change her mind, he would have no further contact with her.

Disgusted at his callousness—especially since it inevitably affected their daughter as well—Betty told Ula to relent. Once more, she decided that ‘the last shreds of my regard for Guido [were] at an end’.

The determination in regard to Victoria, which so soured some of Guido’s relationships, did not extend to others and he placed a new importance on re-establishing the friendships of his youth. Years before, Nettie had complained of his habit of shedding acquaintances. Now, perhaps conscious that, politically, his best years were behind him, he actively sought to rekindle the companionships of the past. His friendship with May Brodney revived. He saw Bertram Higgins whenever the poet came to Australia, and he and the Palmers remained intimate. ‘[Bertram] likes you very much,’ Nettie had told him in 1950. ‘So does Vance, he came back very happy from his visit with you. Feels, as ever, that there’s never any wasted time spent with you—that you are always real in your relations with people, tinker, tailor, poet, painter and drawing them all out so that they talk their best.’

When, in the forties, Hig severed his (by then, fairly tenuous) connection with the CPA, partly because of its vicious campaign against a semi-Trotskyist in the Workers Educational Association, Guido responded with enthusiasm. ‘So you’ve joined the Labor Party, you old rascal, and left a bloke to learn it from The Standard … This is good news to me, since it can only mean that you’ve become definitely “political” again.’ Hig never embraced Trotskyism, but he and Guido remained friends until his death.

Neura, too, had become a critic of Stalinism. Still more or less happily married to Mike, she’d written to Guido during the war about her disgust at a glitzy event in honour of the Soviet Union, overwhelmingly attended by society matrons. ‘It’s to them Stalin is selling out,’ she said, ‘and are they cashing in! They and their international kind. Something bleeds within me and only my faith in the Russian workers remains.’ She lived for a while near Montsalvat, then in a house near Guido in Newport, before moving with Mike to Queensland, where they joined the artists Noel Wood and John Buss (a one-time follower of Jorgensen) in trying to establish a bohemian colony on the tropical Bedarra Island. Perhaps inevitably, the scheme collapsed into bitterness (though Wood forged a successful career painting the island landscape and Buss’ s love of Bedarra led him to play an important role in founding the
Australian Conservation Foundation), and Neura and Mike settled down to run a gallery in Southport.

The friendship of people like Hig and Neura mattered to Guido because, by and large, those loyal to the party continued to shun him. The young communist Bob Gould encountered Guido in 1955 at a meeting of the Clerks’ Union. ‘This little, old, white-haired guy made a fiery speech from the floor attacking the Grouper [Right-wing] leadership of the union. I was sitting next to the key figure of the Labor Left in the union, who was in fact a key figure in the interface between the Labor Left and the Communist Party, and I asked, “Who’s that?” The response was: “Be careful of him, he fell out with the party years ago. He’s a Trotskyite.”’

But the malice of the most dogmatic communists could not prevent history, the most patient of revengers, from settling its own scores. Stalin died in 1953, surrounded by toadies so terrified of responsibility that none dared summon a doctor as he lay unconscious on the floor. Nikita Khrushchev won a savage struggle for succession and, in 1956, he detailed a portion of Stalin’s crimes. His speech, acknowledging what the apparatchiks had denied for so long, plunged the Communist Parties into turmoil.

By then, Betty was in London, where she’d been relaunching her writing career. Her anger at Guido leaving Ula had cooled. She liked Victoria, she decided, and she had not yet received Guido’s request for a divorce. So she wrote him a friendly letter, describing a meeting where his old friend Palme Dutt tried to explain away Khrushchev’s revelations. Dutt had dedicated his life to Soviet apologetics and was, Betty thought, a broken man, feebly defending the indefensible.

‘I remember you saying how handsome he was,’ she told Guido. ‘I looked in vain for any trace of this. He was old, grey and worn, with an underlying expression of sadness, shabbily dressed and … with one button of his fly undone!’

In Australia, the Khrushchev speech—and the Soviet invasion of Hungary the same year—led to fresh defections from the party. Gould and a handful of young dissidents made contact with Nick Origlass, and through him came to know Guido. ‘He was pretty old,’ remembered Gould, ‘but he was up to his ears in Nick Origlass’s small Trotskyist group, and in all the battles against Grouper domination of the NSW Labor Party.’

Guido explained to Gould his political methodology. On election day, he worked hard for Labor, building up his credit in party circles. The rest of the year he spent it, agitating in his branch for Marxist policies. He remained a socialist. He remained a revolutionary. But like Origlass, he saw the only potential audience for socialism as within the ALP and so put considerable effort into the motions about nuclear disarmament or nationalisation of industry with which he plagued the party leaders.
With Bob Menzies’ ample shadow darkening the land, Guido’s endeavours met with no great response. In 1963, when he and Victoria had settled back in Australia, he ruefully wrote to Jim Rawling after canvassing house to house during the election campaign: ‘Too many dogs are Liberals!’ His continuing relationship with Jim, who was politically aligned with the anti-communist Right, revealed a remarkable tolerance for political foes in this last period. He continued, for instance, to correspond with Frederick Macartney, even though the poet had become, as Guido put it, ‘a reactionary old codger’ who published at his own expense a pamphlet denouncing the literary magazine *Meanjin* for harbouring communists.

Of course, Guido had always been ecumenical in his friendships but he also probably reacted to the CP’s insistence on personally isolating its critics. Years later, he told Katharine Prichard’s son Ric Throssell of the grief he’d felt over losing Katherine’s friendship when he split from the party. ‘I still recall with intense sorrow her visit to Sydney,’ he wrote, ‘when she spoke at the Town Hall and how I rushed on to the platform after the meeting longing to just take her in my arms but she said she didn’t want to speak to me, and I faded away.’

Prichard remained, to the end, the most loyal of Stalinists. She shrugged off the Khrushchev speech; she endorsed the Soviet invasion of Hungary. In 1959, Richard Dixon acknowledged her cast-iron faith when he sent birthday greetings on behalf of the party. ‘Your long years of service in the Communist Party,’ he wrote, ‘and your position as doyen of Australian writers have earned you an imperishable place in the hearts of the working people.’

Yet even she couldn’t hide from communism’s mounting contradictions. In the early sixties, tensions between China and the Soviet Union provoked the CP’s first wholesale split, with many hardliners joining a new pro-China party. Eric Aarons, the man who’d cancelled Guido’s study class, became, with his brother Laurie, central to the CPA’s new leadership. The Aaronses never broke theoretically with their Stalinist past but they did show considerably more independence in regard to the Soviet Union. In 1966, the CP condemned the imprisonment of the dissident writers Sinyavski and Daniel and in 1968, it spoke out against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

This was too much for Katharine Prichard. ‘The Supreme Court of the USSR found [Sinyavski and Daniel] guilty of anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation,’ she told Laurie Aarons. ‘I am still indignant that the party of which I have been always so proud to be a member … should have … join[ed] the chorus of criticism aimed at a decision of the Supreme Court of the USSR.’

Of the suppression of the Prague Spring, she said flatly, ‘I am opposed to all the criticism against the Russian move in Czechoslovakia.’

She had learned nothing of the real nature of the Soviet regime but she discovered at last how it felt to belong to an impotent minority within the party. Even so, when Guido wrote to
her in the mid-sixties, she remained guarded. ‘It was a surprise to hear from you,’ she replied. ‘I feel grateful to you always for having introduced me to Marxism, and an understanding of communist principles. My life has been illuminated by them. Despite shocks and vicissitudes along the way I have been able to hold to the fundamental principles. It seems that you have been more susceptible to changes in the political atmosphere.’

This was ungracious; it was also untrue. Still, it opened up communication between them and, fifty years after their shipboard encounter, they exchanged letters with a warmth that slowly grew, until eventually Katharine sent Guido her birthday wishes (‘From one octogenarian to another!’) along with a signed photo. On the back of the portrait, she wrote: ‘With happy memories of years spent for the welfares of peoples—their peace and friendship—dear Guido …’
Not very long after their reconciliation, Katharine Susannah Prichard succumbed to heart disease, leaving Guido as one of the last survivors of his time. Vance and Nettie Palmer, Hig, Kavanagh, Laidler: by then, they were all gone.

Their was the generation that had encountered Bolshevism not simply as the doctrine ruling the USSR but as a shocking new intellectual paradigm, a critique of the values that had led to the Somme, and a vision for a different way of living. Guido described 1917 as his *annus mirabilis*, his year of political miracles; he was not alone in sensing that the world had somehow changed.

But by the sixties, those who remembered the days of wonders were slowly vanishing, and Guido knew it. Mourning Nettie’s passing in 1964, he wrote sadly, ‘the death of my old friend is really the end of an era for me, my own era, while I have nevertheless to go on living as fruitfully as possible in another era that is so very far from being mine.’

In revolutionary Berlin, Guido had worked alongside Victor Serge, the novelist, poet and revolutionary. Years later, Serge, too, reflected upon his epoch and its fate.

‘What remains of the unforgettable enthusiasm of 1917?’ he wrote. ‘Many men of my generation, who were among the first communists, now harbour only feelings of rancour towards the Russian revolution. Scarcely any of the participants and witnesses have survived. The party of Lenin and Trotsky has been put to the firing squad. The documents have been destroyed, hidden or falsified.’

Today, the destruction and falsification seems almost entirely complete. When discussing the radical experience, both the Left and the Right employ a simple-minded storyline about ‘the failure of communism’, a fairy tale that identifies the socialist tradition unequivocally with Stalin. Yet, as Baracchi and Serge knew from experience, the communism that collapsed with the Berlin Wall only ever became dominant through the suppression of a quite different current. Stalin killed far more Marxists than Hitler, and the first victims of the Soviet camps were always the Trotskyists, marched off to execution in their thousands and singing ‘The Internationale’ as they died. In Spain, in China and elsewhere, Stalinism established its hegemony through the revolver and the torture cell.
If Guido faced no physical violence when he broke from the Communist Party, his stand still required considerable moral courage—and the fate of Frank Stevens reminds us that, even in Australia, Stalinism found its victims. There’s something truly odious, then, about a history that smugly collapses the fate of the persecuted into a narrative about their tormentors. Serge spoke of the ‘shabby logic’ that simply pointed to Stalin’s Russia to proclaim ‘the bankruptcy of Bolshevism, therefore of Marxism, therefore of socialism’.

‘A seemingly easy way of avoiding the problems which are now gripping the world,’ he wrote, ‘and which will not release their grip for some time to come. Do you remember the other bankruptcies? What has become of liberalism? What has enlightened or reactionary conservatism produced? Did it not give birth to Mussolini, Hitler, Salazar and Franco? If we were to make an honest assessment of ideological bankruptcies, it would be a lengthy business. And it’s still early days …’

As Serge suggests, glib answers to historical questions rarely prove as final as they seem. So it was for Guido.

In 1964, the year that Nettie died, Robert Menzies—Guido’s eternal enemy—reintroduced compulsory military service. Even as Guido mourned the past, the issues that had dominated his youth burst back onto the national stage.

In his final decade, Guido lived to see a student rebellion of a kind Alexander Leeper could never have imagined: an insurgency measured not in the handfuls of 1917 or the scores who joined the Labour Club in the thirties, but counted in the tens of thousands who poured out of the campuses and onto the streets. The exuberant sexuality of the new rebels, their experimentation and relentless bohemianism resembled much more closely the iconoclasm Guido had found around the IWW than the stuffy puritanism of post-war communism.

As an old, old man, Guido embraced the anti-war movement. He marched with pride in the Sydney Moratoriums, which a younger generation of Trotskyists—people like Bob Gould—had helped to organise. The CPA, now far more consciously ecumenical, invited him to speak at its fiftieth anniversary; he praised its attempts to break from its past but did not succumb to invitations to rejoin.

In Melbourne, radicals again controlled the Melbourne University Magazine and, in 1970, one of them, the future historian Janet McCalman, wrote to Guido, asking for his memories of an earlier anti-conscription campaign. He duly provided a long and witty account of his battles against the young Menzies as a salute to the ‘immense progress the student movement has made’. He concluded: ‘Today, rising eighty-three it is still “Leftward Ho!” with me, and the grand idea of self-management as the operative principle throughout socialist society comes like a shot in the arm to strengthen us in the indispensable work, after that monstrous distortion known as Stalinism, of giving back to Socialism its “human face”.'
And, would you believe it? When I turn to my old “textbook” on National Guilds, published in London in 1914, I find workers’ self-management, in principle if not by name, enshrined in its pages—among the ideas I tried so hard to popularise at Melbourne University so long ago.’

Guido’s own attempt to create a radical alternative to Stalinism proved largely a failure, with the Origlass group achieving little more than bare survival. Theoretically, Australian Trotskyists struggled to explain exactly what had taken place in the Soviet Union. What was the Stalinist regime? What about Eastern Europe? China? Vietnam? Cuba? Were these societies more or less progressive than Western capitalism?

Yet, if Guido could pass on no complete answers to the radicals of the seventies, he did contribute a point of undeniable moral value: the assertion of a continuity between the ideals of the old-time militants and the aspirations of the New Left, in opposition to the stupidity and violence of Stalinism.

His article for McCalman concluded with a favourite aphorism from the German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle: ‘In big things you can’t be cunning.’ There are no easy solutions to historical problems, no way to trickily circumvent the legacy of the past. Like it or not, a Left that arises in the future will need to confront the issues Guido Baracchi faced in 1940, for they go to the very heart of what it means to be radical.

Soon after Guido’s MUM article, his beloved Victoria collapsed with a cerebral haemorrhage. She was rushed to Penrith hospital and Guido kept watch at her sickbed until the nurses led him away, utterly heartbroken. She had left him, not the other way around, and the experience rendered him desolate. He had loved Victoria, he said, more than any woman he’d known.

In the wake of Victoria’s death, Guido’s feud with Betty came to an end. Though she’d sworn she cared for him no longer, when she spoke to him on the phone she found the words ‘I still love you, Guido’ slipping from her lips.

He was surprised into silence. Then: ‘Thank you, Janie, it is good to be forgiven.’

Guido’s closest relationships always contained a contradiction between, on one side, his charm, intelligence and sensitivity and, on the other, his inevitable and brutal faithlessness. He brought tremendous pain to his lovers and to his children. Yet most (though not all) of his partners came, eventually, to a kind of reconciliation with him.

‘I had suffered greatly as a consequence,’ Betty wrote, summing up her time with Guido, ‘but those nine years spent with him had been the best and most enriching of my life.’

A few years later, Betty returned from Europe and talked with Guido about Montsalvat. He read to her Cavafy’s famous poem Ithaca, an elegant meditation upon success and failure, dreams and reality:
Always keep Ithaca in your mind.
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
But do not hurry the voyage at all.
It is better to let it last for many years;
and to anchor at the island when you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.
Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
Without her you would have never set out on the road.
She has nothing more to give you.

Guido suggested that Montsalvat might be Betty’s Ithaca—but, clearly, the poem applied to him as much as to her. The beautiful voyage is, after all, a love story. Odysseus does not simply make his way home; he travels in search of his Penelope. Love is about journeying, suggests Cavafy, never simply about arrival. Guido never reached a communist Ithaca but that failure did not render his travels valueless.

He spent his very last years in Emu Plains alone with his two much-loved dogs, overfed pugs called Petunia and Chinicchi. Deirdre and her husband helped him re-establish himself, inviting him to dinner most nights and finding a carer, Mrs Janzen, to visit daily. Gilda, working in the film industry, came on the weekends when she was not on location.

The sacking of the Whitlam government in 1975 rekindled all his political fire. He’d been drawn into politics all those years ago when he overheard discussions of Capital’s plans against the Labor government of 1910. The Dismissal represented a very similar process, and it outraged him just as much as an old man as it had as a youth. Since returning to Australia, he’d been agitating in the Willoughby branch of the ALP. With the election looming, he threw himself into the campaign. He leafleted. He started conversations with strangers. He walked the streets with a sign around his neck. And, on his birthday, despite the tearful plea from Mrs Janzen not to go out in a heatwave, he traipsed through the pubs of Penrith, drumming up every last vote against Fraser.

It was, of course, too much for him. Later that day, Gilda found him unconscious on the floor. She called an ambulance that took him to hospital, where he lingered for two days. Gilda visited him on 13 December. As a girl, she’d listened while her father recited the long alliterative passages he loved from Ulysses and Finnegans Wake. The words came back to her, and she whispered gently into Guido’s ear: ‘And it’s old and old it’s sad and old it’s sad and weary I go back to you, my cold father, my cold mad father, my cold mad feary father … A way a lone a last a loved a long the.’

They were probably the final words he heard, for he died later that evening.
Though a pastor read the Lord’s Prayer at Guido’s funeral, the ceremony culminated in a more secular ritual, with the mourners delivering three hearty cheers over the grave. Nick Origlass delivered the eulogy at the wake, held at Guido’s favourite restaurant in Penrith, and the mourners responded with a rendition of ‘The Internationale’ and ‘The Red Flag’. The Sydney Morning Herald recorded the passing of a ‘Legend of the Left’; the communist Tribune, the paper that had once denounced his ‘moral cowardice’, published its own effusive tribute: ‘His life and death seem symmetrical around a revolutionary course which he defined for himself. Not everybody would endorse every twist of that course but few would deny its essential sincerity.’

But there was, of course, a romantic coda, to disappoint, once more, those who loved him. Guido had promised Betty when they separated that he’d take care of Gilda in his will. Only after his death did she discover he’d instead deeded the entirety of his property to a neighbour with whom he’d become, in his eighties, hopelessly smitten.

It was impetuous; it was cruel; it was irresponsible. It was, in the end, quintessentially Guido.
Notes

ABBREVIATIONS

FDL = Fleur-de-Lys

MUM = Melbourne University Magazine

PAM = Papers of AT and May Brodney, State Library of Victoria (SLV) MS10882.
PBR = Papers of Betty Roland, various collections.
PEMH = Papers of Esmonde Macdonald Higgins, Mitchell Library (ML) MSS740.
PGB = Papers of Guido Baracchi, National Library of Australia (NLA) MS5241.
PJR = Papers of James Normington Rawling, Australian National University ANUN57.
PKSP = Papers of Katharine Susannah Prichard, NLA MS6201.
PLPH = Papers of Marjorie Pizer and Lesbia Harford, ML MSS7428.
PPB = Papers of Pietro Baracchi, NLA MS8913.
PROV = Public Record Office Victoria.
PRT = Papers of Ric Throssell, NLA MS8071.
PVNP = Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, NLA MS174.
TCA = Trinity College Archives, University of Melbourne.
UMA = University of Melbourne Archives.

ATB = AT Brodney
BR = Betty Roland
EK = Esmond Keogh
EMH = Esmonde Macdonald Higgins
GB = Guido Baracchi
JNR = James Normington Rawling
KSP = Katharine Susannah Prichard
LK = Lesbia Keogh
MB = May Brodney
NB = Neura Baracchi
NP = Nettie Palmer
PB = Pietro Baracchi
VP = Vance Palmer

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2 UNIVERSITY


3 WORLD WAR I

Directions for GB’s treatment: Inspector-General: Registers of Personal Descriptions of Prisoners Received, 1918, PROV, VPRS 10858. ‘very tough’: PB, Notebook One, PPB/2/3. prison conditions: See Library Register, 1901, PROV, VPRS 511 and Prison Request to the Prison Governor, 1917–21, PROV,VPRS 10135. ‘He looks very well’: PB, Notebook One,
riot in Pentridge: Register Of Warders And Conduct Records, 1918, PROV, VPRS 10892. ‘happy personality’: Socialist, 12 July 1918. ‘a great favourite’: Socialist, 22 March 1918. ‘always well’: PB, Notebook One, PPB/2/3. ‘too much expediency’: WH Rays(?) to GB, 16 March 1918, Department of Military Intelligence Report 97/695, NAA A6286.


4 LOVE AND MARRIAGE

5 DARLING STREET


6 Weimar

‘Guido sold his house’: PB, Notebook One, PPB/2/3. John O’Cassidy: Walker, Solidarity forever, pp. 191–2; see also Cain, p. 6. ‘I beg to report’: ASIO file. ‘accorded by his fellow students’: ASIO file. ‘Myers and co, Ltd’: ASIO file. ‘She had the infernal malignity’: PB, Notebook One, PPB/2/3. ‘A few days later Toby’: PB, Notebook One. ‘it was merely a woman’s’: quoted in ASIO file. ‘wore a large diamond ring’: Roland, Eye of the beholder, p. 62. ‘She intends to go back to Sydney’: PB, Notebook One, PPB/2/3. ‘We will give you

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Casey on GB: RG Casey to Stanley Bruce, 18 February 1926 in Hudson & North (eds), p. 141. ‘people would now really believe’: quoted in Rawling, Communism Comes to Australia, PJNR/1. GB’s departure: Neura Baracchi to AT Brodney, 8 February 1926.
`It was for [the seamen’s leader] and his mate`: GB, The Twenties, PGB/5/44.


‘Maughan’s work is not art at all’: in Papers of Jack Maughan. ‘muddling and confusing’:

8 Russia

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