

'Logic is not the truest guide' – R.S. Ross: Rationalism, Vision and Socialism in the Evolution of a Labour Editor

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Whether the cup with sweet or bitter run,
The Wine of Life keeps oozing drop by drop,
The Leaves of Life keep falling one by one.

Robert Samuel Ross, was born in 1873 and raised in Brisbane. A printer's son, a printer's apprentice, he went to work at seventeen. On his twenty-first birthday his journal records a solemn promise: 'Now I must commence to take life seriously. ... One must have some knowledge in life. Get knowledge, for knowledge is power!' The next year, at the age of twenty two, he became a founding member of the Australian Socialist League with Ernie Lane. At twenty five he read the 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam'....

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument...

With them the seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with mine own hand wrought to make it grow;
And this was all the Harvest that I reaped—
"I came like Water, and like Wind I go."

The poem: like kindling to a flame in Ross. He bought a book, a little blank book, a Commonplace Book they called it, and began to write in founding scraps of poetry and philosophy. His fiancé entered words sometimes too. They were abstainers, temperance people, but it began with 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam'. Not having the money to buy the Persian classic, Ross took a library copy to his brother's printshop – where he worked now as editor of 'The Queensland Sportsman' – set it in type, and ran off thirty copies for his friends, including Ernie Lane.²

Ernie Lane, lifelong friend, youngest brother of Utopian Will, already gone to build his Paradise.

Paradise is a theme of this paper, paradise and vision and hope which were held aloft by Ross as he sorted through the mess of life and influences which clamoured for his attention as a young man starting out. Paradise was a Socialist Commonwealth, the vision of which he imbibed from boyhood, the hard facts of which he found, not in Paraguay, but in the outback of his own land. Hope he held aloft later when his reason told him the cause was lost.

But first there were the 1890s, the crazy years in Brisbane of Doctor and Saint. Ross courting the beautiful, clever Ethel Slaughter at church and temperance meetings, then off to hear Wallace Nelson 'the high priest of ... Freethought' lecture on Sunday night. Days spent in the healthy, backslapping company of cricketers, nights soaking in the heated debates of the bohemian Bread and Butter Club. He went to talks on the obsessions of the age – hypnosis, spiritualism and phrenology. He read the works of Robert Ingersoll and William Morris, Swinburne and Kipling, Darwin and Marx, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Francis Adams and William Lane.

Lane? – yes, Lane in particular... since reading his first copy of *Boomerang* as a boy of fourteen, Bob Ross had worshipped Lane. He might have been winning prizes for diligence at the local Baptist Sunday School, but it was not the church that held him under a spell. Ross would later described Lane's hold upon him:

Never a phrase-maker so magical, nor personality so picturesque, nor preacher so magnetic, nor propagandist so mighty. ... He caught as in a vice and held you ... heaving,

passion-swept... Those who came under his influence were stirred to the depths mentally and spiritually... He gripped – and across all these years he grips. He was a prophet, priest, and king.³

Yes, caught in a spell, the wonder dust of utopia, the hope, would always be in his eyes. His youngest son, Edgar Ross, later saw this as the result of an idealist approach to life and the brotherhood of man. 'How different the realities of life!' writes the practical son.⁴ And it is true. How different the realities of life at the end of this century to the visions held out to readers one hundred years ago by the likes of Lane, William Morris and Edward Bellamy. Ross read Bellamy's *Looking Backwards*, serialized in the Queensland *Worker* from the first issue, and saw the future, saw society today in fact. It is instructive to see today as it was seen then – an early example of science fiction, the novel begins:

Living as we do in the closing year of the twentieth century, enjoying the blessings of a social order at once so simple and logical that it seems but the triumph of common sense, it is no doubt difficult for those whose studies have not been largely historical, to realize that the present organization is, in its completeness, less than a century old. No historical fact is, however, better established than that till nearly the end of the nineteenth century it was the general belief that the ancient industrial system, with all its shocking social consequences, was destined to last, with possibly a little patching, to the end of time.⁵

A little patching was not the vision splendid of the last century for this. They would make a new and perfect world for generations to come, for us. How different the realities of life.

Raphael Samuel has made the connection between religious and political fervour around the turn of the century, which did not stop at the borrowing of language and music. To him the 'moral temper' of revolutionaries had striking religious overtones.⁶ Samuel reminds us that Engels pointed to the similarity between primitive Christianity and the new labour movement saying: 'Both Christianity and proletarian socialism promise impending deliverance... Christianity sets this deliverance in life after death, in heaven, socialism sets it in this world, in a transformed society.'⁷ Often the visions of this transformed society, of this heaven on earth, have religious overtones: Lane parting the waters to lead his flock unto the promised land; Bellamy's Dr Leeke, raising Julian West from the dead, taking him to look down from the belvedere of his home upon the great city of Boston where large open squares are filled with trees, where statues glisten and fountains flash in the late afternoon sun. And Dr Leeke and Julian West looked down and they saw that it was good.

These visions were the chalice, the sweetest cup of all, for the true believers of their time.

Like so many others Bob Ross was converted straight from Christianity to Socialism. R.S. Ross's British counterpart, TA Jackson – also raised a Christian, a printer turned revolutionary writer and an auto-didact – describes the process: 'In 1900 we got converted to socialism ... The adoption of Socialism meant for us a cruel wrench, a breaking of all personal ties, an alienation of friends and relations,

the setting up of a barrier of division between oneself and one's parents and all that they had hoped we would become.'⁸

But the consequences in Brisbane cannot be compared to those

in Britain. While Jackson found himself shunned by friends and family, Ross felt comfortable, for some time, continuing to attend church and temperance meetings alongside those of the Socialist party he was helping to form. Not that the local churches were always tolerant of the new currents in thought. One minister described Freethought as 'a hideous cancer, slowly but gradually gnawing at the heart of society, and taking away its beauty, its health, and threatening to deprive it of its very existence.' He warned that without the universal adoption of book burning, respect of authority, religious meditations and Catholic education the community would be 'engulfed in the frightful abyss of socialism.'⁹ I am unsure of how Ross's family greeted their son's changing beliefs. Did they know he ducked out of the family firm every week to buy the *Worker* and read it hidden under 'the frame' while he worked? His father, Robert Mitchell Ross, held a brief and unsuccessful proprietorship of a Toowoomba paper, the Darling Downs Gazette during this time. In it he writes of society emerging from the embryo and 'assuming a higher and more complex organisation'¹⁰, and it is quite possible that by this he meant Socialism and that the family shared their son's beliefs.

Despite his visions of utopia Bob Ross did not follow his hero, Lane, to Paraguay though it seems certain that he might have liked to. Perhaps he was a little young at twenty, perhaps a little in love, a little thin and pale next to the rugged men of the Queensland bush. Pale hair, pale eyes behind frail glasses, a printer's apprentice, perhaps he wondered what good he could do.

As it happened there was plenty for him to do in Brisbane where Lane's departure had left a vacuum in labour propaganda. After the demise of the Socialist League a new group was organised: the Social Democratic Vanguard, which again saw the team of Bob Ross and Ernie Lane. The main objective of the Vanguard was to concentrate on the free distribution of Socialist literature and Bob Ross directed his tireless energy to this task. One of their earliest publications was his 'Let There Be Light', described as a manifesto of 'reason for and work of the Vanguard'.¹¹ Through the Vanguard Ross was now regularly published in the Queensland *Worker*, and the Gympie *Truth*, though rarely under his own name. As was common at that time, as William Lane had done before him, Ross chose a number of pseudonyms to sign his articles: Lionel Lynx, Max Argent, Etho and Comrade Sam seem to be directly attributable.

This work for the Socialist Vanguard in Brisbane led to an offer in 1903 to edit the Broken Hill paper the *Barrier Truth* owned by the Australian Labour Federation. Still a weekly at this time, Ross would lobby to have the paper made a daily, which it became in 1906 and remains today, making it the first and longest running labour daily in the English speaking world.

Ross was thirty. He arrived in town in the middle of a dust storm with a wife and child and one more not long on the way. This was his Paraguay.

The wide-eyed child who sat on the train from Brisbane via Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide was Lloyd Ross. Later he wrote of his father at that time:

The working-class that R.S. Ross had known mainly from books and pamphlets became men who worked along the line of lode. Poverty, which he hated as an expletive, became suddenly real as he daily passed the tin shacks and saw children playing among the sand and watched the weary women working in the grim back yards. The theoretical discussions among the members of the Democratic Vanguard were argued out in pubs at the change of shifts, or at meetings of miners, whose thoughts on solidarity seemed to be very different from the ideal discussions of bush workers. Union leaders were not always comrades; friends were rare in number; but deep in their loyalties...

On Friday nights... the workers walked in two unorganised processions up and down, along Argent Street. No transport was permitted, no songs, no slogans, just men walking, as they did in many mining towns in Australia and Britain.¹²

At first these were honey days. Ross planted seeds from the jacaranda of his childhood home and watched them grow in the dust. He walked among the wild grasses, let his vision spread vast into the desert – the horizon distant, hazy, yet without distractions more sure to draw the eye.

Sweet is success. The paper flourished and a building fund was set up to establish it in its own quarters on Argent Street. The new Social Democratic Club held regular gatherings where ideas were discussed. Labour heroes took the long train west to participate in lectures and debates. Often they were interviewed by the editor of the *Truth*. Ross developed as a writer and speaker. His ideas sharpened with what was already possible: democratic municipal socialism in action – the council ran the town swimming pool, Turkish baths and abattoir, there was a co-operative store, a union choir and band, workers' clubs and libraries and a Socialist Sunday school.

During the day the doors were open to the *Truth*. At night there were lectures and debates, meetings and fundraisers to attend, books to discuss long into the night. Lloyd writes:

Ross was available to... any citizen who had a story to tell, anyone who had a complaint to make, an idea to peddle, a crusade to wage. He quickly became known as he walked the streets as a disciple of Karl Marx, a preacher of the Socialist Commonwealth, – a member of the Brotherhood of all men and women. Broken Hill united the advantages in easy connection and quick warmth of a small town with cultural and sociological stimulus of a city.¹³

Even before R.S. Ross arrived, the *Truth* was notable for its inclusion of women. Ross was advised to 'get an intelligent woman on the paper', but needed no encouragement.¹⁴ Having grown up with five sisters, having absorbed the advocacy of women's rights from William Lane and Mark Rutherford with their portrayals of feisty heroines in *Workingman's Paradise* and *Revolution in Tanner's Lane*. Living through Australia's own suffrage debate, which had just been won by the women of New South Wales and was still under consideration in Queensland. With Ethel, now his wife, beside him, there was no question in Ross's case but that women would be included in the propaganda work of the *Barrier Truth*, both as journalists and readers. In years to come he would continue to support the rights of women and publish articles and advertisements on birth control at a time when such things were barely acknowledged in general society. Despite a personal puritanism, he supported the rights of unmarried mothers and homosexuals long before they became an acceptable cause.¹⁵

Yet, like every hero, R.S. Ross had a fatal flaw. His first editorial for the *Truth* is predictably rah, rah, rah with a special pledge to the power of labour newspapers and a personal commitment to live up to them. The second editorial is a treatise to women – nothing but promise and encouragement, and his third editorial... his third editorial for the modern reader reads like nothing but hatred and lies – a well argued, lucid defence of the White Australia policy in response to a letter from an elder at the Afghan Camel Camp pleading for equality.¹⁶

Ross does not rant or rave, he is almost apologetic, he is sorry but this cannot be. The admixture of inferior races with white always leads to the detriment of the superior race. Fact. In a time when men were fond of facts and did not question every law.

It seems clear now that Ross's racism was a result of an interpretation of Darwin influenced by the readings of Herbert Spencer and Havelock Ellis. For Ross it was a matter of

scientific interest and he took some effort to be informed in the area.¹⁷ Like many of his contemporaries, he believed social and biological evolution were inextricably entwined. Nothing in the Queensland society he grew up in had lead him to question the assumptions behind the idea of a superior race, least of all his worship of Billy Lane. In Broken Hill he would meet other Darwinists, such as Tom Mann, who had differing interpretations and who tried to argue him out of his beliefs.¹⁸ He would even become an enthusiast of Kropotkin and adopt the ideals of *Mutual Aid*. Yet, still he persisted in his dinosaur beliefs. When a defence was needed there was always the fear of cheap labour to fall back on. And, it must be said, for the most part the town approved.

Later, during the first World War, Ross would become almost incoherent on the matter as he struggled to reconcile a deep commitment to internationalism with his support of the White Australia policy. Eventually, as Graham Osborne has argued in *Who Are Our Enemies?*, the conflict would lead to the demise of Internationalism in the Victorian Socialist Party partly due to Ross's editorship of their journal the *Socialist*.¹⁹ In one article Ross quotes Liebknrecht, 'For Socialists there is no question of nationality. We know but two nations – the nation of capitalists... and the nation of proletarians... The workers of all countries form ONE nation.', but then goes on to explain: 'As for 'White Australia', its seeming contradictions with the position presented in these articles. I am content to say that a White Australia does not necessarily conflict with the principles of Internationalism.' The mighty labour crusader even resorts to the *Bulletin* to justify his position, 'A year after this cruel war is over it will again be possible for an English girl to marry a German or an Austrian gentleman without losing caste. It will be just as impossible as it was previously for her to marry a Ghurkin or a variant Chinese fellow-patriot from Hong Kong without losing caste. The Race is an imperishable principle, while the flag is a shipping episode.'²⁰ Could Ross not see that the maintenance of caste of by marrying an Austrian gentleman had something to do with class?

It is a question which Edgar Ross has asked of his father. 'R.S. Ross was ahead of his times in many ways, why not on this?' Why when '[h]e could see the future in many ways, a human society free of exploitation of man by man, free of the gross inequalities between rich and poor, free of social injustice, free of wars', why was his attitude on this determined by the prevailing attitude of the times?²¹

In his biography of William Lane, Lloyd Ross points out that when discussing 'the colored question, Lane lost all sense of equality, internationalism, decency, and respect for science. His refusal to compromise on this issue and his determination to be extreme could quite fairly lead to the question whether his views on other subjects were not the result of emotionalism, rather than of intellectual inquiry.'²² Confronting the same beliefs in his father, in an unpublished biography, Lloyd is forced again to ask this question and concludes that in this respect *only* did his father's 'ruthless pursuit of reason falter and confuse the problem in words.' It is a difficult position to defend, and the sole defence his son can give is the lame one of ignorance, coloured by his own understanding of the man: Lloyd writes 'R.S. Ross was a quiet, tolerant, lovable personality and unaware of the injustice and cruelty that his judgement of "the alun(sic) menace" did to individual Afghans.'²³

This questioning of Bob Ross's reasoning is a rare moment for Lloyd who had a firm belief in the rationality of his father. He speaks of Ross's 'infatuation in the supremacy of reason' of his search for a new track to socialism – not through 'wandering in ...circles, nor following votes, [nor] trust in a mirage, but logically, methodically with courage and discretion. ...His views at a crisis in his thoughts or actions were not the result of a

confusion of tongues, but were the culmination of the ideas of many books and much discussion. When a decision was made by him it was clear, certain, courageous.'²⁴ Certainly R.S. Ross has been long regarded as a rationalist. He was associated with the Rationalist Association in Melbourne, his journal, *Ross's Monthly* being considered something of a defacto publication for that group. His advocacy of freethought was intricately tied up with his socialism – he once declared them to be 'one and indivisible'.²⁵ He has an entry in the Australian *Secular Who's Who*. Yet it is here, in this interpretation of the man, that we find the most intriguing difference between his sons. Where Lloyd is adamant that Ross did not 'trust in a mirage' Edgar felt he was 'caught up in the idealism of the Utopians' and argues his father's faith in visions was his downfall. 'Logic is not the truest guide, strange as that may seem.' Bob Ross once advised his son – advice neither taken nor forgotten.²⁶

Reading through Ross's speeches and editorials it is not hard to reconcile these two views. As Edgar himself has noted, they often begin and end with wild bursts of poetry or philosophy, some of it dating back to the little Commonplace book from Brisbane where it all began. But the body of the text is argument and logic. His lectures were advertised as 'meat for strong men and not milk for babies'.²⁷

The writing was strong. Not just when the cup ran sweet, but when the wine curdled in his hand Ross wrote strong. After he was voted out of the editorship of the *Barrier Truth* because of his anticlericalism, because he advocated birth control and told the women of the Barrier where they could get it, because he would rather see children at a socialist Sunday school than a Christian one, because he preached himself the visions of a tangible heaven on Sundays. After the priests and reverends and bishops had installed that pious liar Joe Norton to his post. After all this, he started a new paper from within the Social Democratic Club – *The Flame, The Tongue of the Revolution* – which burnt like nothing he had written before.

They made Ross town librarian and he revolutionized the Library, consolidated and updated their collection and made sure the books were available when and where the people were. His first report as librarian to the council expresses his belief in the power of words: 'Through your libraries, gentlemen, you may largely transform the community into one of readers and thinkers'. He asks the councilors to imagine the effect of a book like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* on a community if copies were available immediately after publication. Library membership jumped from 85 to over 1000 in the eighteen months of his tenure.²⁸ He went on a speaking tour and words consumed him – writing, reading, speaking, organizing. But he was a restless man. Unhappy, unfulfilled – he wrote to Tom Mann, as though to himself, the task was too little, too long to wait: 'it is a question of years of unremitting struggle, with travail and tribulation all the way – and you're not prepared for years more in Broken Hill, Bob.'²⁹

Later, after the defeat of the second conscription debate there would be despair too. After the socialization objective was dropped from the Labour Party Platform, when he knew that Marx was dead and worms were riddling his corpse, there was despair. But Ross did not die a conservative, he did not lose his faith or vision, he did not take the coy post in ze capitalist press, like William Lane, he did not take a walk and never return, like so many others. Once, in the middle of the war he wrote: 'This war. This inferno of ending lives. This silly bloody mix-up. This futile mess... I'm in the depths of – what? Despondency? Cynicism? Temper? I don't know. It would be easier to howl than to hold tight to sanity.'³⁰ Yet he did hold tight, through illness and setbacks and betrayal he held tight.

There is a poem by Francis Adams – the first poem of his from the collection *Songs of the Army of the Night* that Ross

published in the *Truth*. Adams was a family favourite with the Ross's, in fact another poem of his was published by 'Comrade Eth' in her column on the same page as this verse first appears. It is a poem which neatly captures many of themes that have been discussed today. The religious overtones of fraternity and conversion which are to be found in the socialism of True Believers, and their despair as that belief is challenged not so much by the manoeuvrings of capitalists – no every move they make only confirms and steadies the believer – but, by the grinding defeats in countless committees and meetings, by the apathy of the workers themselves by their snarling scorn for those who have come to save them. Titled 'To An Unionist', it is a piece that Ross returned to several times, publishing the refrain to make a point in his editorials or as a flourish to end a column of propaganda. Because of this repetition, because it addresses a despair felt by so many of those who gave their lives to the cause, not in any dramatic way by the shedding of blood, but in the harder more stubborn way of continuing on when the cause seemed lost, because we know that Ross felt this despair and continued on, because these are words from a man who later felt despair so deeply that the woman who loved him 'gave him a revolver and turned away', because of this, I suspect, I know, that for Ross... these words meant something to him.

To An Unionist³¹

"If you only knew
How gladly I've given it
All these years –
The light of mine eyes,
The heat of my lips,
Mine agonies,
My yearning tears,
My blood that drips,
My brain that sears:
If you only knew
How gladly I've given it
All these years –
My hope and my youth,
My manhood, my Art,
My passion, my truth,
My mind and my heart:

"Oh my brother, you would not say,
What have you to do with me?
You would not, would not turn away
Doubtingly and bitterly.

"If you only knew
How little I cared for
These other things –
The delicate speech,
The high demand
Of each from each,
The imaginings
Of Love's Holy Land:
If you only knew
How little I cared for
These other things –
The wide clear view
Over peoples and times,
The search in the new
Entrancing climes,
Science's wings
And Art's sweet chimes

"Oh my brother, if you only knew
What to me in these things is understood,
As it seems to me it would seem to you,
What was good for the Cause was surely good:

"Oh my brother, you would not say:
What have you to do with me?
You would not, would not turn away
Doubtingly and bitterly:

"But you would take my hand with your hand,
O my brother, if you only knew;
You would smile at me, you would understand,
You would call me brother as I call you!"

Endnotes

- 1 Edgar Ross, *These Things Shall Be! Bob Ross, Socialist Pioneer – His Life and Times*, Mulavon Publishing, Sydney, 1988, p. 15.
- 2 This paper is greatly indebted to an incomplete manuscript biography of R.S. Ross by his son Lloyd Ross to be titled *Red Blood and Black Ink/ A Biography of an Australian Rebel*. The manuscript is held amongst the Lloyd Ross Papers, National Library of Australia (NLA), MS 3939, Boxes 65-71. Quote and anecdote from Ernie Lane, *Dawn to Dusk. Reminiscences of a Rebel*, William Brooks, Brisbane, 1939, pp. 59-60.
- 3 Lloyd Ross, *William Lane and the Australian Labor Movement*, Forward Press, Sydney, undated (1937), p. 101.
- 4 Edgar Ross, *These Things Shall Be!*, p. 178.
- 5 Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward – if Socialism comes 2000-1887*, Foulsham, London, no date, p. 5.
- 6 Raphael Samuel, 'Sources of Marxist History. British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One', *New Left Review*, No. 120, March –April 1980, pp. 21-96.
- 7 Friederich Engels, 'Primitive Christianity', in Marx and Engels, *Pre-Capitalist Socio-Economic Formations*, pp.482-4. Quoted in Samuel, *ibid*.
- 8 T.A. Jackson, Manuscript autobiography, quoted in Vivien Morton and Stuart Macintyre, 'T.A. Jackson, a Centenary Appreciation', *Our History*, No 73, 1979, p. 6.
- 9 Rev. Le Menant de Chesnais, *Lectures in Liberty, Authority, Freethought, Socialism, Naturalism and Atheism*, Freeman's Journal, Auckland, 1883, p. 34 & 48.
- 10 Rod Kirkpatrick, *Sworn to No Master: A History of the Provincial Press in Queensland to 1930*, Darling Downs Institute Press, Toowoomba, 1984, pp.105-6.
- 11 Ernie Lane, *Dawn to Dusk*, p. 63.
- 12 Lloyd Ross, Manuscript, Box 65.
- 13 *Ibid*.
- 14 R.S. Ross, 'A "Truth"ful History', interview with Jabez Wright, *Barrier Truth*, 27 March, 1903, p. 1.
- 15 Edgar Ross, *These Things Shall Be!*, p.116.
- 16 R.S. Ross, 'A Movement and a Message-Bearer', 6 March, 1903; 'Woman – God Bless Her!', 13 March, 1903; 'The Afghan Menace', 20 March, 1903, *Barrier Truth*, p. 2.
- 17 Graeme Osborne, 'A Socialist Dilemma', in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus eds, *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class*, Hale and Iremonger in association with the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Sydney, 1978, p.118.
- 18 John Laurent, 'Tom Mann, R.S. Ross and Evolutionary Socialism in Broken Hill, 1902-1912: Alternative Social Darwinism in the Australian Labour Movement', *Labour History*, No. 15, November 1986, pp. 54-69.

- 19 Graeme Osborne, 'A Socialist Dilemma', pp. 112-128.
- 20 R.S. Ross, 'In the Library', *Barrier Daily Truth*, 2 January, 1915, p. 6.
- 21 Edgar Ross, *These Things Shall Be!*, p. 132-3.
- 22 Lloyd Ross, *William Lane*, p. 69.
- 23 Lloyd Ross, Manuscript, Box 66.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Ray Dahlitz, *Secular Who' Who*, Self Published, Melbourne, undated.
- 26 Edgar Ross, *These Things Shall Be!*, p. 178.
- 27 'News and Notes', *Barrier Daily Truth*, 15 May 1915, p. 3.
- 28 Lloyd Ross, Manuscript, Box 64.
- 29 R.S. Ross, letter to Tom Mann, 13 August, 1908, Robert S. Ross Papers MS 3222, Manuscript Collection National Library of Australia, Canberra 1983. Folder 1 - Item 6.
- 30 R.S. Ross, 'In the Library', *Barrier Daily Truth*, 10 August 1915, p. 3.
- 31 Francis Adams, *Songs of the Army of the Night*, Reeves, London, 2nd edition, undated.