



Researching **LABOUR HISTORY** in the Fryer

HUMPHREY McQUEEN DESCRIBES THE CONTRIBUTION MADE BY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARIES TO HIS FORTHCOMING HISTORY OF THE BUILDERS' LABOURERS' FEDERATION (BLF), *WE BUILT THIS COUNTRY*.

Above:
Members of the Builders' Labourers' Federation work on Torbreck in the early 1960s. Torbreck Manuscript collection, UQFL426.

Three times in the past year I have spent days in the Fryer, burrowing through the minutes of the Queensland Branch of the Builders' Labourers' Federation, from the late 1920s to 1970. Most BLF records are with the Butlin Archives at the ANU. Some materials are in the Australian Archives. ASIO was not as thorough as I would have liked.

The idea for a history of the BLF came in 1993 during the negotiations to create a single union for the construction industry, which became a Division of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). Because of the rancour left over from the 1986 de-registration of the BLF, its stalwarts decided to focus on the issues that united the leadership of the new body rather than rake over those that divided them. In 2004, Liz Ross published her account of the 1980s battles, *Dare to*

Struggle, Dare to Win, with Vulgar Press, run by ex-Queenslander Ian Syson. By letting multiple voices be heard, Liz's book persuaded CFMEU officials that it was time to revive the promise of a history of the BLF.

One driving spirit in this proposal was the Division's Victorian President, John Cummins. He, Liz Ross and I were in a group talking about her book after a meeting to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Eureka Stockade. 'Cummo' complained that he could not find anyone to take on the assignment. Liz felt that she had given enough of her life to that cause. Another member of our circle, with whom I had just discussed the increasing difficulty of earning a living as a freelancer, chimed in: 'Humphrey will write it.'

The erstwhile BLs wanted a survey of all States and the ACT from the start of the union. They were not sure when that had been. That uncertainty was one reason why they needed their story set down. They hope to see the union whole, and not just as the Jack-and-Norm show over Green Bans and secret commissions. They like my proposed title – *We Built This Country: a history of builders' labourers' and their unions*.

From the first, John Cummins made it clear that I was going to have to write an unofficial history: 'No two officials would agree about anything.' The sub-committee given carriage of the project insulated it both from interference by union officials and from the Federal government's attacks on the union's existence. Although under no obligation to show any of the manuscript to anyone in the union, past or present, I shall do so to protect the account from errors about the strength of concrete or the terminology for scaffolding. What is a 'put-log'?

Some idea of what I have gained from the materials in the Fryer is available in my study of the 1927 claim by the Building Trades for a forty-hour week published in the *Queensland Journal of Labour History*, number 3, for September 2006. [Individual subscription at \$20 per annum for two issues, PO Box 5299, West End, QLD, 4101.] The correspondence about that matter in the Fryer brought key players to life and provided insights into the level of organisation around regional centres, especially Townsville. Of course, those files needed to be supplemented by holdings at the John Oxley and in Canberra, as well as police files at the State Archives. The latter had to be reached by train and foot – the least appealing journey to work that I can recall from nearly 40 years of research.

The Queensland minutes correct the picture of the Federal Office and other States that I glean from their records. When the Branch officials returned from national meetings, they told executive meetings about the personalities and deals. This gossip went into their minutes whereas the Federal papers recorded only the outcomes of the debates.

Since July, I have stopped ploughing through boxes of records. My days and nights are now devoted to shaping what

I have drafted into a publishable account. Its style and structure are aimed to appeal to union activists. Research is now focused on cross-checking what I have, or finding the trivia needed to tuck-point. Far from suffering from writer's block, I am intimidated by the cutting required to stay within my self-imposed limit of 100,000 words. My draft for the article on the 1927 dispute ran to over 16,000 words. I cut back to the 12,000 in print. For the book, I shall have to excise another 8,000. Instead of slashing and hacking two-thirds out of what is in the computer, I have selected issues and themes for twenty chapters. Each will be 4,000 words long. My hope is to fill those empty files from the overflowing drafts.

The remaining 20,000 words will be short pieces, between 500 and 1,500 each. Most will be first-hand accounts from labourers about their lives and work. The rest will take up topics such as 'Mr Booze' who undid several officials, including Queensland organiser Jim Taylor, by 1966. Several small segments will give accounts of the work of organising around job sites. The Fryer holds an organiser's diary which records his hour-by-hour doings. *We Built This Country* will also recognise the office staff, all women, on whom the officials relied but who are rarely mentioned in union histories. Mrs Drew, for example, helped prepare the Award Log and did the accounts for the Labor Day Committee.

Another recurrent problem was the embezzlement of union funds. A few job delegates and shop stewards were charged with keeping the dues they collected. In most cases, the union Executive tried to retrieve the money and rehabilitate the offender. At the top level, a left-wing Branch Secretary, Joe Brice, made off with £1,000 in 1924; right-wing State Secretary and Federal President, Ted Farrell, admitted to taking almost as much in 1962; the union deducted the loss out of his entitlements. The records also reveal a saga about an erstwhile official over whose land the BLF held a lien from around 1924. The surviving minutes start too late to explain the origins of this relationship which dragged on for thirty years, popping up to mystify each new cohort of office-bearers, not to mention their historian.

Hall Greenland used some of the Fryer materials for his biography of Nick



Above:
Sales of units in Torbreck are promoted in a Brisbane parade of the early 1960s. Torbreck Manuscript collection, UQFL426.

Origlass (1908-96), *Red Hot*. Nick had been a 'shovelless man' in the early 1930s before moving to Sydney as a militant. Origlass will be familiar to Friends as one of the characters in the *Rats in the Ranks* documentary about Leichhardt Council.

After *We Built This Country* is published, my research notes and rough drafts will be posted on a website to provide researchers with a platform of ideas and data upon which to build accounts about the union in each State, for limited periods or on particular topics such as job safety. The interviews and illustrations that I have collected from Queensland officials will be deposited with the Fryer. Writers a hundred years hence will have information about the daily lives of labourers in the post-war years.

Trawling through the minutiae of Executive minutes has helped me to specify the larger forces transforming the BLF in Queensland. Empirical research need not end as Empiricism. Until the mid-1940s, the Queensland Branch had been led by Left-wingers, including a few Communists.

After that, its officials were Right-Wing Queensland Labor. The latter chugged along committed to the State Labor government and to Arbitration, spurning direct action. Their comfortable world fell apart in 1957 with the Labor Split, the arrival of a non-Labor government for the next 32 years, the start on high rises in the CBD, such as Torbrek on Highgate Hill. The BLF records are a foundation for architectural history.

The effect of the urban growth was small compared with the impact of the resources boom in central Queensland. From the early 1960s, infrastructure projects upended the way the union operated. Servicing construction camps dragged officials out of the metropolitan area and onto sites where the members were as new to industrial disputes as to their organisers. The Queensland Branch has never been the same.

The Fryer is a precious resource. Special collections of this type are threatened with extinction. The neo-classical economists who justify giving the haves more money

on the grounds that it will trickle-down to the poor do not extend this sophistry to research for Australian history. The push to promote '1788 and all that' in the schools assumes that the facts to be crammed into students' heads are already known. Research implies revisionism which suggests subverting the biases cherished by the culturally quasi-literate.

The fact is that the history available to primary schools trickles down from reservoirs such as the Fryer. The flood of knowledge about Australia that has enriched our understanding of every cranny of our experience began with the expansion of supports for research in the 1960s. Any shrinkage of those resources, whether in libraries or postgraduates, is being felt in classrooms.

The managers don't see the world that way. Their future lies in on-line access to digitised data. The value of access to original documents and hard copies is disparaged by self-styled 'digital natives', few of whom have ever done any research. We all benefit from Google and Libraries Australia. Yet we are also at risk from the destruction of hard-copies in the name of preserving them. Nicholson Baker documented the scale of this vandalism in *Double Fold* (2001).

My research into the 1927 dispute mentioned previously revealed another instance of primary sources that have gone missing in action. The organiser for the Building Trades, J B Miles, addressed a rally in Toowoomba, analysing the political economy of the claim for a shorter week. The *Chronicle* published the speech in full, over two columns. This report is valuable for what it reveals about more than one dispute. Miles went on to become General Secretary of the Communist Party. The speech was one of the longest expositions of his thinking. The problem about gaining access to this source began when the *Toowoomba Chronicle* was bound with the bottom 10cm folded back. In hard copy, this treatment made it tricky to read the lower sections. The firm that microfilmed the *Chronicle* copied the pages with the bottoms turned up so that their readers now lose 20cms of copy.

Collections are useless without staff whose duty statement requires them to become familiar with the holdings.

A research library cannot do its job by staffing its reference desk with clerical assistants trained to do no more than point the inquirer towards a computer terminal. A friend of the Fryer will preserve its standard of service to guarantee the value of its collections.

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Below:
Two views of Torbrek under construction in the early 1960s. Torbrek Manuscript collection, UQFL426.

