Benjamin Wilkie discusses the reasons behind the prominence of Scottish migrants in the Australian communist and worker movements which emerged in Australia as a reaction to the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Jim Comerford was born on 9 September 1913 at Glencraig, Fife. Jim’s father and both his paternal and maternal grandfathers were miners. In 1922, a ten-year-old Jim and his mother emigrated to New South Wales and settled in the mining town of Kurri Kurri in the Hunter Valley; his father had moved out in the previous year. Like his father and grandparents, Jim became a coal miner. When he began work, Australian workers were in the midst of an unprecedented labour movement, throughout which strikes and lockouts were commonplace. Jim remembers one particular lockout in the coalmines of northern New South Wales at the end of the 1920s:

We had a big fire going and we had community singing. I can still see those blokes in the reflection of that fire... A large proportion of the men there had gone through the 1921 General Coal Strike in Britain and also the 1926 General Strike. People like my father had come here because they were victimised. They thought they’d escaped all that by coming to the Promised Land and they saw the lockout as a repetition. They were going through the same thing again.

AUSTRALIA IN THE DEPRESSION

Emigration from Scotland in the 1920s and 1930s was a mostly working class affair. Over this period of immigration to Australia, the regional origin of Scottish emigrants was ever more likely to be from the industrial central Lowlands – Glasgow and surrounds, the Lothians, Dundee, and Fife. Mineworkers, engineers, textile workers, and their families formed the majority of British immigrants in the 1920s, and the decline of industry after World War I was the biggest cause of the preponderance of these occupations among Scottish migrants. A proportion of Scottish arrivals between 1919 and 1923 were also ex-servicemen. An assisted passage was given to ex-service personnel from Scotland during these years, and over 36,000, or 42 percent of them, chose Australia as their destination. Farmers and agricultural workers were scarce – land settlement schemes and farm apprenticeships were often failures due to the lack of experience of the immigrants.

Those Scottish immigrants who arrived on Australian shores during the late 1920s and 1930s would have encountered a nation in the midst of a worker’s movement of great strength and influence, spurred on by the Great Depression. The 1920s thrust by Prime Minster Stanley Bruce for British men, money and markets for Australia had faltered, the spirit of expansion had waned, and Bruce’s Australia...
Unlimited had succumbed to the Great Depression. A new Labour government cut wages by ten percent in January 1931, and in the same month Australia's currency was devalued by 25 percent. Unemployment was at thirteen percent at the end of 1929, and by the end of 1931 it had reached twenty-three percent. The Labour government, it has been argued, failed to protect jobs and the jobless. The level of unemployment in Australia during the early 1930s – higher than Britain and most other industrial economies – overwhelmed private and public charities and welfare programs. The unemployed subsisted on ration vouchers, and others were compelled to work for a meagre allowance. In rural areas, shantytowns emerged to accommodate the masses of city dwellers unable to afford their rental payments.

In all, 321,000 British migrants arrived in Australia at this time and over 60,000 of them were Scots. The Great Depression mostly stymied immigration from Scotland during the 1930s until a small recovery was made towards the end of the decade. This did not deter some. Sydney Samuels left Glasgow in 1933, and he said: 'I left Scotland in the Depression and my parents thought that there wasn't much future in the UK in those days and they thought I might have an opportunity going out to Australia.' It is doubtful he feared any better than Angus Macdonald, who sailed from Britain to Australia in November 1926. Angus eventually settled down to work as a gardener for several years. By 1933, however, he was out of work and living in a shelter for destitute men in Sydney, where he stayed until 1937: 'There was no work to be had,' said Angus in 1987. 'Work was impossible. I was one out of thousands.'

The working class nature of Scottish immigration to Australia in this period was reflected in the political allegiances of the new arrivals. From the 1880s, Scotland was the front line of British socialism. Between 1850 and the early 20th century, the labour movement slowly dominated the nation’s political discourse. By the 1930s, Scotland was slipping from its position as 'Workshop of the Empire', and Scots were becoming more concerned with domestic issues than expanding Scottish interests abroad. As a result of the growing labour movement in Scotland, Scottish immigrants to Australia from the 1890s onwards were gradually more likely to support the Australian Labour Party on arrival, or become part of other socialist or radical groups. The radical labour movement in 1930s Australia, fuelled by the Great Depression, was a fitting environment for newly arrived Scottish radicals.

SCOTTISH MIGRANTS AND THE AUSTRALIAN LABOUR MOVEMENT

In most conventional histories, interest in the ethnic origin of the Australian labour movement of the early 20th century is limited to the Irish component. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, however, the most active and prominent members of the Communist Party of Australia were more than likely to be Scottish migrants, as were many prominent trade unionists. Australian historian Stuart Macintyre has written that it is, 'a well-kept secret that Australian communism was a Caledonian conspiracy.' British historian William Kenefick observes more broadly that, 'the Scots were significant in promoting international socialism, syndicalism, communism and anti-imperialism across the globe, both before and after World War I. This is clearly a matter for further investigation.'

At the forefront of the labour movement in 1930s Australia was the Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM), which the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) formed as a representative body for the mass of workers who had fallen victim to the Great Depression. Its membership...
of 30,000 far outnumbered
the Communist Party's 2,000
followers. Under the leadership
of UWM, rallies and protests
were organised at ration depots
in cities, and the movement ran
campaigns against evictions.
These activities were irregular
and, in due course, outlawed by
governments. Nevertheless, the
CPA and the UWM provided
an outlet for the frustrations of
thousands of Australian workers.
Throughout the decade, the CPA
involved itself in unions and
other working class organisations,
prolonging its influence on the
workers movement well after the
economic crisis had lifted.

Radical Scottish migrants are
easily found in histories of the
workers movement in 1930s
Australia, and they are most
especially found dotted through
the ranks of the Communist Party
of Australia and within miner's
organisations. William Paisley
Earsman, Christian Jollie Smith,
and Jock Garden - all Scottish -
were founders of the CPA in 1920.
From 1926, the party secretary
was Tommy Wright, a metalworker
from Scotland. At the coalfields at
Lithgow and the Hunter Valley in
New South Wales, and Wonthaggi
in Victoria, there were many Scots
working in the mines. Communist
party leaders in the Hunter Valley
included Scottish migrants Hetty
and Hector Ross. In Lithgow, Jock
Lindrop and Jock Jamieson were
important CPA members, while
fellow communist Scots Charlie
Nelson and Bill Orr respectively
became secretary and president of
the Mineworkers Federation.

In October 1911 he married
Elizabeth Jane Black.
Together, Jack and Elizabeth
emigrated to Queensland in
1913. After working for some
years as a stonemason, he was
recruited to the Queensland
Socialist League in 1918. When
the Communist Party formed
in 1920, he joined its Brisbane
branch. Over the next few years,
Jack represented the Australasian
Meat Industry Employees' Union,
and then the United
Operative Stonemasons' society
of Queensland, on the Australian
Trades and Labour Council. He
quickly became influential in the
Communist Party.

In 1929 he took control of the
CPA along with Bert Moxon
and Lance Sharkey. By 1931, Jack
had moved to Sydney,
where his central committee
determined policy, enforced its
implementation, and expelled
those who dissented. In this
time, he was especially critical
of middle-class converts to
communism, including fellow
Scot, Professor John Anderson.
Questions of the legality of the
party made Jack's preoccupation
with control far worse, and
he operated in a mostly semi-
clandestine manner as a vigilant
and powerful leader.

Jack visited the Soviet Union
between 1934 and 1935, and
returned to an Australia that was
still experiencing the social and
political upheaval of the workers
movement. He was a figurehead
for this movement, and became
well known for his pronounced
Scottish burr. After speaking to a
particularly unsympathetic group
of Presbyterian clergymen, one
reporter observed that, 'his Scotch
accent did not help him at all.'

The CPA was banned in 1940
for its anti-war policy. Jack
went underground, and began
writing fierce polemics under the
pseudonym 'A. Mason'. Lance
Sharkey, over time, overshadowed
him and his influence in the party
gradually declined through the
1940s. An Australian Security
Intelligence Organisation officer
reported in 1953 that the
Grand Old Man of Australian
Communism had developed into
a kindly little man, aging and
whimsical, but he still holds the
fire of battle in his eyes. They are
sharp, brilliant and magnetic, a
strange contrast to the light, grey
hair and wrinkled, puckish face.

Jack had unsuccessfully
contested five State and
Commonwealth parliamentary
seats between 1929 and 1952.
Throughout the Depression,
the CPA grew in influence and
numbers, and Scots continued to take important roles within the organisation. Orr and Nelson continued their work in the Miners Federation. A large number of ex-Catholics joined the party, with the effect of adding their sometimes-militant atheism to the secularised preaching of prominent Scottish communists such as Jock Garden and Bill Orr. In the words of one historian, these Scots brought their 'egalitarian zeal' to Australian workers organisations. It is enough to say that Scottish migrants in 1930s Australia were prominent in the communist and workers movements that had emerged in the years prior to and during the Great Depression.

SCOTTISH, BUT NOT...

The traditional history of the labour movement in Australia identifies a separation during World War I between supporters of conscription, who were typically Protestant loyalists, who left the Labour Party, and the opponents of conscription, heavily Irish and Catholic. Another fault line in the labour movement appeared during the 1930s. Importantly, the division was between the primarily Catholic Irish Right and the mostly secular Left. While the Irish Right of the labour movement drew strength from the affirmation of a distinct national and ethnic tradition, the Scots on the secular Left did not outwardly express a unique ethnic or national identity, and they did not associate with the radical tradition in Scottish politics.

Historians have found that Scottish socialists in Australian never thought of themselves as forming a separate ethnic grouping within the labour movement, and did not situate themselves within any tradition of Scottish radicalism. It has been contended that the historical association of Scots with Presbyterianism might have encouraged Scottish Australian communists — for whom religious association was rare — to play down their ethnic identity. Although tension between religion and communism is relevant, a further connection of socialism and nationalism was, and still is, culturally influential in Scotland.

From the middle of the 19th century working class campaigns for Scottish self-government and sympathy for the ideals of international socialism developed in parallel, and the subordinate role of Scotland as an internal British colony was a common theme in left-wing discourses. In the aftermath of World War I, British patriotism in Scotland was in decline, and there is a general consensus among historians that the period from 1919 to the mid-1930s was coloured by a complicated mix of Nationalism and Socialism, throughout which the latter seemed to have dominated political life. Through the interwar era, radical Scots coupled national independence with improved domestic conditions for workers and for the nation as a whole.

This is best illustrated during this period by instances where historical icons of Scotland as a nation were recast in support of the workers movement. In the 1930s, Scottish Communists marching against unemployment could be seen parading with placards of William Wallace alongside posters of Karl Marx. The Scottish Labour leader, Tom Johnstone, characterised Wallace as a radical: 'If at the bottom of Wallace's revolt was not a last effort to cast of feudalism from Scotland, why did the Scoto-Norman nobles hate him so?' Indeed, most left-wing home-rule proponents in this period interpreted Wallace as a proto-socialist — some observers even alleged that the English saw him as 'almost a Bolshevik.'

Additionally, the combination of Socialism and Nationalism was evident in working class anti-war demonstrations. At one rally, the prominent socialist leader John Maclean told 50,000 working men and women that they ought to fight for, 'freedom and liberty at home before going to Flanders to die for it.' Yet, for all of this, Socialism became decoupled from Nationalism among Scottish radicals when they migrated to Australia.

NEW SCOTS AND OLD SCOTS

To understand why Scottish radicals may not have been as enthusiastically Scottish as others were, it is helpful to consider their relationship with the older, established Scottish community in Australia. As one writer suggests, 'some of the more important
aspects of Scottish political radicalism may be better revealed in the context of how well left-radical ideas were received by the imperial working class. Australian historian Malcolm Prentis hinted at a solution when he wrote:

Observable in twentieth-century politics is a disjunction between the increasingly left Scots-born and the increasingly right Scots-descended... just as Scottish politics was continuing to move leftwards, labour supporters were becoming more prominent amongst Scots immigrants to Australia.

During the inter-war period, and well beyond, conservative opinion-makers in Australia depicted Communism as a foreign doctrine at odds with the Australian mainstream. Although Communists sometimes disputed the accusation, they accepted themselves as members of an international socialist movement. They challenged the discriminatory White Australia policy and aligned themselves with the large numbers of foreign immigrants in what was essentially a British colony that was fanatically mono-cultural.

Because their ideas conflicted with popular notions of Australian social and economic protectionism, one historian writes that, in the first half of the 20th century in Australia, 'the Scots and indeed other working-class immigrants from the United Kingdom had an ambiguous status.' The relationship between Scottish communists and the dominant notions of Scottish Australian identity in the 1930s exemplifies this ambiguity. While Socialism and Nationalism existed in relative harmony in Scotland, the Scottish communists in Australia removed their socialism from a nationalist narrative.

The case of Scottish communists and radicals in Australia provides a clear demonstration of the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of diasporas. As some sociologists have said of national identity among Scots in contemporary British society, 'who we are and are judged to be in a particular context depends on how well our claims are regarded by those around us... National identity may lead ultimately to social inclusion or exclusion.'

To many historians of the Scots in Australia, the Scottish diaspora has simply been that portion of the population born in Scotland, or of Scottish ancestry who are living anywhere but Scotland. This definition has its place; however, it can create an illusion of community by neglecting the contested nature of national identity within that group of dispersed peoples, reducing our ability to observe diversity, tension and fragmentation within the culturally and social heterogeneous structure of the Scottish diaspora. Indeed, merely claiming a common ancestry was not reason enough to prevent tensions from rising between groups of Scots in Australia during the early 20th century.

The dominant notion of Scottish national identity in the 1930s was one for which British patriotism and imperialism was central, and it effectively excluded Scottish radicals from a sense of belonging to the diaspora in Australia.

This identity both expounded loyalty to the British Empire and romanticised Scottish cultural traditions while celebrating Scottish achievements in Australia. Indeed, the role of the Scots as Empire builders was one of the most common tropes in descriptions of the achievements of the Scottish people abroad. 'In Australia there were thousands of Scottish people of the second and third generations,' the speaker at a Rockhampton Caledonian society function said in 1938, 'and while they were Australians first they still felt themselves to be inextricably and sentimentally bound to Scotland.' He cited the preponderance of Scottish festivals and cultural traditions still thriving in Australia as evidence for the fact that, 'we still feel a deep sense of pride in our racial kinship with such men of genius as Scott and Burns.' There is an important qualification, however. Scotland is part of a 'great empire', and Scots have made, 'the best settlers in the dominions and colonies.'

Caledonian societies were strongholds of 'Imperial Scottishness', despite their appropriation of the Highland mythos and its trappings. On St Andrew's Day 1938 the Brisbane Caledonian Society and Burns Club, to the sound of bagpipes, welcomed a haggis - carried on top of a shovelful of burning peat - to their celebrations. Grace was said in Gaelic, before the Reverend Scott Macdonald told the audience that, 'there was no mass hysteria or national megalomania in celebrating St Andrew's Day', because St Andrew was, 'observant and...
In the 1930s, Scottish communists marching against unemployment could be seen parading with placards of William Wallace alongside posters of Karl Marx.
excorcism.' The Advertiser in Adelaide published a piece – ‘Scotland Not To Blame For Mr. Thornton’ – in which another senator, MacDonald, responded that, in any case, ‘he could not understand how a real Scot could be a Communist.’

But George Martens suggestion that all Scots should be deported based on their association with communism was not entirely fanciful. Throughout the 1920s, immigration officials employed a variety of methods to restrict communists from entering or returning to the country. The most common method was to deny a known-communists access to a passport by simply asking the British government to withhold passport endorsements for individuals travelling within the Empire jurisdiction. This was the case with William Earsman, one of the Scottish founders of the CPA. Despite living in Australia since 1910, the Australian government attempted to have his endorsement withheld after he visited the Soviet Union in 1921. After the election of the Conservative Lyons government in the early 1930s, immigration restrictions increasingly targeted ‘undesirables’ who were known to have associated either with communists or Communist parties. While the Immigration

Merely claiming a common ancestry was not reason enough to prevent tensions from rising between groups of Scots in Australia in the early 20th century

Act was amended in 1932 to make it easier for foreign-born Communists to be deported as criminals, the easiest method was to subject individuals to a dictation test – usually in a language they did not speak. By September 1932 the Minister for Home Affairs, Archadale Parkill, was boasting that he had deported 109 Communists - otherwise known as ‘prohibited immigrants’. Antagonisms between the established Conservatives and the new radicals sometimes went beyond mere words. On 13 June 1938, the King’s birthday holiday nonetheless, a group of militiamen from the Victorian Scottish Regiment entered the CPA offices on Hosier Lane in Melbourne. The group, reported the Argus, damaged paintings of Karl Marx, harassed the party members, and stole what they claimed to be anti-war pamphlets and suspicious maps. The court charged Kenneth Baron Moore, who led the group of militiamen to the party rooms, with wilful damages though a charge of assault was dismissed. What these examples illustrate is that the dominant conception of Scottishness in Australia effectively excluded communists and radicals from ‘belonging’ in the older, established Scottish community. Because of the dissonance between authentic, contemporary Scottish politics and working-class identity and the constructed, Australian notion of Scottishness, nationalism became decoupled from radical politics among the Scots in Australia.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the most active and prominent members of the Communist Party of Australia were more than likely to be Scottish migrants. Radical, often irreligious and carrying with them a doctrine that was considered alien to Australian society, these Scots and many other politically active, working-class immigrants from Britain had an ambiguous status in the interwar decades. Although the Scottish element in Australian communism was prominent, these Scots did not outwardly express a unique ethnic class identity, and they did not connect with the radical tradition in Scottish politics. Indeed, their status as Australian Australians was in doubt at most times, if it was not being suppressed by dominant voices in the Scottish Australian community.

Ben Wilkie is a doctoral researcher at Monash University, Australia. His PhD focuses on the social and cultural diversity of the Scottish diaspora in Australia during the late 19th and early 20th century.

Further Reading

Reds: the Communist Party of Australia from origins to illegality by Stuart Macintyre (Sydney, 1998)
The Scots in Australia by Malcolm Prentis (Sydney, 2008)
Weevils in the Flour: An oral record of the 1930s depression in Australia by Wendy Lowenstein (Melbourne, 1998)
Red Scotland!: the rise and fall of the radical left, c.1872-1932 by William Kenefick (Edinburgh, 2007)