Scottish workers and radicals in early twentieth century Australia

Ben Wilkie

Introduction

In March 2012, the Scottish-born Australian Labor Party Senator, Doug Cameron, spoke to his colleagues in the chamber about a book he had recently launched – Pat Kelly’s *Scotland’s Radical Exports: the Scots abroad – how they shaped politics and trade unions*. He told the other senators: ‘We hear a lot about some of the things the Scots have done, such as bringing culture and engineering excellence to the world. They have taken economics around the world, and they have also taken trade unions around the world. Wherever capitalism went, the Scots trade unionists were there. I am very happy to be one of them ... The union movement is not just about the Scots, but the Scots have made huge contributions around the world. ... Scottish entrepreneurs always had that check and balance from the Scottish trade unionists.’1 Nevertheless, Senator Cameron’s recognition of Scotland’s impact on labour movements in Australia has not been widely elaborated on in the historical literature.

A significant portion of the history of the Scots in Australia has been dominated by discussions of their contribution to political and social elites. Scottish immigrants have indeed made distinctive contributions to Australian politics and commerce, among other areas of endeavour, and have sometimes been overrepresented in these areas.2 Studies of this facet of their experience, however, have come at the expense of inquiries into the vast majority of Scots who contributed to the development of Australia within its working class. Similarly, despite a recurring identification of Scots as leaders in society, historians have given scant regard to their leadership in the Australian labour movement.3 In beginning to address the deficiency, this article takes a two-pronged approach: in the first instance, it offers a survey of the nature and numbers of Scottish workers in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Then, it outlines the distinctive Scottish involvement in the Australian labour movement of the early twentieth century, with particular emphasis on the Communist Party of Australia before the Second World War. In doing so, this article responds to calls from historians for more attention to be given to the vast majority of Scottish immigrants who were workers, and also to those Scots who contributed to the unions and political parties of the working class in their adopted countries.4 It also contributes to a wider literature on the transnational elements of labour movements, as well as research into unique working-class experiences that are
grounded in ethnicity and nationality.

Any attempt to argue for a distinctive national or ethnic contribution and experience must address legitimate concerns over the potential artificiality of extracting a Scottish narrative from the multiple influences that formed the fabric of Australian society in the twentieth century. This is a potential weakness of any study of Scottish migrants – working-class or elite. Indeed, the numerous attempts to account for an alleged abundance of ‘Great Scots’ abroad by reference to Calvinism or the lad o’pairts mythology have been duly criticised for their uncritical reliance on the idea of an innate, Weberian Protestant work ethic among migrants from Scotland. The myth of Scottish exceptionalism abroad is better explained as a misguided reading of genuinely distinct differences in socio-economic background as well as educational, religious, and cultural upbringing. The material success of some Scots is also more to do with effectiveness of urban capitalistic techniques and controls in North American and Australasian industries than any inherent propensity to do well.

Nevertheless, distinct differences in the background and upbringing of migrants have combined to create unique experiences and outcomes. The duty remains with the historian to demonstrate how these manifold influences produced a unique Scottish contribution that can be legitimately delineated from the historical narrative without recourse to uncritical flattery. This article attempts to achieve this by focusing upon the unique origins of Scottish workers’ and those Scots who contributed to the labour movement in Australia, and offering insights into how their backgrounds produced the distinct Scottish outcomes discussed throughout. More importantly, it reinforces the notion that Scots had unique contributions to make to the workers’ struggle by examining how they and their ideas were received by Australian society and especially by other Scots. In this regard, not only does hindsight indicate a genuinely unique Scottish experience and contribution to the working classes and the labour movement in Australia, but contemporaries also drew the distinction.

Scottish workers in New South Wales and Victoria, 1901-1933

Emigrants from Scotland brought with them various occupational skills. Scotland’s cotton textile and iron industries helped it to achieve eminence as an industrial nation, and its male workforce was predominately employed in these sorts of industries. The Scottish Census of 1881 provides some indication of the origins of the occupational backgrounds of many migrants to Australia. Industrial occupations were the majority, accounting for 61% of male employment in Scotland, and up to 79% in cities such as Dundee, or 73.2% in Glasgow. Agricultural work accounted for 19.4% of the entire male Scottish workforce. While just 5.9% of Scots were professionals, in cities such as Edinburgh 14.9% of the male workforce was professional. Commercial enterprise accounted for 11.4% nationally, but in
Glasgow the figure was 19.7%. Overall, industry was the largest employer of men in late nineteenth century Scotland, and the occupational profile of Scottish migrants in Australia reflects this but also its strong agricultural sector.

Table 1: Top five occupations for Scottish men in NSW, 1901

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of Total men</th>
<th>% of Scottish-born men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mines and Quarries</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>11.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>10.68</td>
<td>9.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>8.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoralism</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>7.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation of sea and river traffic</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>6.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Census of New South Wales, 1901.*

In urban areas, Scots were most likely found living in inner city, portside suburbs in which occupations such as engineering, shipbuilding, and construction were predominant. The statistics related to Scottish employment reinforce these findings. The results also shine light on rural and regional employment for these migrants, including work on farms and in mines. In the state of New South Wales in 1901, Scots could be found in a range of occupations (see Table 1). The primary sector was the biggest employer of Scottish men at this time. Approximately 9.2% were employed in agriculture, 7.7% were employed in pastoral industries, and 11.2% were working in mines and quarries. Indeed, Scottish men were overrepresented in mining, and were over two times more likely to be employed in this occupation than the total population. Scots were underrepresented in agriculture (but not pastoralism), fisheries, and forestry.

Around 10.7% of Scottish men were employed in transport and communications. The regulation of sea and river traffic accounted for 6.6% of the total proportion of employed Scots, and they were over three times more likely than the total population to be employed in this particular occupation. Closely following transport and communications was construction, accounting for 10.5% of working Scottish men. The majority of Scots in the construction industry were employed building houses and other buildings – 8.1% of Scottish men in New South Wales were builders, and they were two-and-a-half times more likely to be employed as such than the total population.

Finally, manufacturing accounted for 7.5% of employment for Scottish men. Scots were engaged in manufacturing and producing books, sports equipment, watches and clocks, vehicles, saddlery and leatherware, furniture, and numerous
other items. Although the occupation only accounted for 1.2% of male Scottish employment, Scots were highly overrepresented in the manufacture of ships, boats, and maritime equipment. Almost 14% of all shipbuilders in New South Wales were of Scottish birth, meaning that they were over five times more likely than the total population to be working in this occupation. Similarly, Scots were around three-and-a-half times more likely to be employed in the manufacture of engines, machines, and tools, thus accounting for 9.3% of all employees in this occupation.

The notable contribution Scottish workers made to shipbuilding in New South Wales and Sydney is to be expected, and echoes a similar role Scots played in the shipbuilding industry of New Zealand. The Scottish iron industry was revolutionised in 1828 by the invention of the hot blast for smelting iron. Scotland subsequently became a centre for British engineering, shipbuilding, and for the production of trains and locomotives; steel replaced iron at the end of the nineteenth century. After 1860, Clydeside shipyards specialised in steamships made of iron and steel. ‘Clydebuilt’ became the industry standard for high quality military and commercial vessels, and Glasgow took primacy as the world’s shipbuilding centre. Production on the River Clyde reached its peak in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and Glasgow firms completed 370 ships in 1913 alone – even more were produced during the First World War.

The biggest shipowners in Australia tended to have their best vessels constructed in Scottish yards. Nevertheless, a substantial shipbuilding industry grew up around Australia’s ports, with Sydney taking its place as the largest and most important of the Australian shipyards. Apart from having one of the best natural harbours in the country, Sydney was Australia’s first port and was the first to develop industry, and generally had better equipment and facilities as a result. It was also situated in close proximity to some of the world’s finest shipbuilding timbers, as well as nearby iron foundries and marine engineering works. It is no surprise that Scottish migrants carried their expertise in shipbuilding to the Australian ports and shipyards. The propensity of Scottish men to work in Australian mines is also accountable by reference to their backgrounds in Scotland. In 1891, there were 87,406 mineworkers, and by 1901 there were 115,994 people working in mines. By 1921, there were 155,252 mineworkers in Scotland.

The apparent skew towards mining, manufacturing, and construction reflects the preponderance of industrial employment in Scotland at the time of migration and the dominance of mining and manufacturing in the Scottish economy. Shipping was a major part of Scotland’s urban economies, and the overrepresentation of Scots among shipbuilders reflects both this and the urban origins of Scottish migrants to Australia. Nevertheless, both agriculture and the pastoral industry in New South Wales provided a significant proportion of Scottish men with employment, as did the mining industry.
The data available for Scottish women in New South Wales tells a different story, and helps to round out our picture of Scottish employment. In 1901, 8,957 of the 12,151 Scottish women in New South Wales, or 73.7% of them, were recorded as being ‘dependents on natural guardians’. Another 165 women were ‘dependents upon the state’. Nevertheless, 3,024 Scottish women took home an income (see Table 2). The largest occupation for Scottish women was in the supply of board and lodging (3.4%) and domestic service (6.5%). There was also a considerable number of women (3.2%) employed in the textile industry. Most of these women were employed producing clothing, although a small number were involved in the manufacture of other textiles.

Since these statistics refer to only a handful of women, we must be careful of placing too much significance on their overrepresentation in certain occupations. Nevertheless, some interesting figures do emerge that are substantial enough to consider seriously. There were roughly three times as many Scottish women living from their own means than would be expected, and around two-and-a-half times as many as we would expect were working in healthcare. Furthermore, Scots made up around 7.4% of the total number of women working in property and finance – about four times more than would be expected. Nonetheless, we must be cautious with such statistics that seem to reinforce notions of an inherent Scottish exceptionalism. There were nearly twice as many Scottish men working in finance and property than would be expected, yet these occupations accounted for only 2.4% of the Scottish workforce, or 453 individuals. Statistically punching above one’s weight does not always equate with increased influence or impact.

Table 2: Top five occupations for Scottish women in NSW, 1901

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>% of Total women</th>
<th>% of Scottish-born women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Service</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>6.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply of Board and Lodging</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dressmaking</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Means</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of New South Wales, 1901.

Scottish migrants in New South Wales in 1901 were employed in a variety of occupations, but some general observations are possible. Mining, construction, and manufacturing provided the most jobs to men, while paid and unpaid
domestic labour was by far the largest occupation for women. The male statistics particularly point to the occupational skills acquired in Scotland, where industrial employment was overwhelmingly the norm. The figures are also compatible with an argument that migration presented opportunities for financial and social progression for professionals and businesspeople, and this goes some way to accounting for the overrepresentation of Scots in business and commerce in Australia. The data for 1921 provides a similar, if less detailed, portrait of employment and work for Scottish migrants.

In 1921 in Australia, 3.8% of Scots were employers and 7.4% were self-employed or in small business (see Table 3). While the census occupational grades were not applicable to 46.4% of Scots, meaning that that they either were dependents, students or were men of private means but were not in business, 36.6% reported that they were working for wages or salary. In addition, a small number (0.2%) were ‘assisting without wages’, 4.8% were unemployed, and 0.7% did not state the grade of their occupation. Breaking down the statistics to male and female proportions provides further insights. There were approximately 60,419 Scottish men in Australia in 1921 and 48,337 women. Of the men, 6.2% were employers, 11.4% were on their own account, 55.7% were working for wages or salary, and 8.1% were unemployed. Among Scottish women, just 0.7% were employers, 2.4% were own their own account, and 12.8% were working for wages or salary. The majority of 82.9% stated that occupational grades were not applicable, suggesting that many were engaged in unpaid domestic labour.

Table 3: Occupational grades of Scottish men and women in Australia, 1921

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>3758</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>4076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Own Account</td>
<td>6881</td>
<td>1168</td>
<td>8049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting w/out wages</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage or Salary Earner</td>
<td>33,637</td>
<td>6184</td>
<td>39,821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>4875</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>5263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Total</td>
<td>49,381</td>
<td>8093</td>
<td>57,474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>10,397</td>
<td>40,093</td>
<td>50,490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60,419</td>
<td>48,337</td>
<td>108,756</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1921.
We can further break down the data from 1921 if we take the state of Victoria as a case study. In 1921, 7.3% of Scottish men in Victoria were employers and 12.4% were working on their own account. Just over half of male Scots (50.6%) were working for wages or salary, and 5.8% were unemployed. These broad occupational grades were not applicable to 22.2%. On the other hand, one% of Scottish women were employers, 2.6% were self-employed, 11.4% were working for wages, and 0.6% were unemployed. The census does not distinguish domestic work as a form of labour in itself here, and the occupational grades were deemed not applicable to 83.9% of Scottish women.

We can learn more about the occupational profile of Scots by making comparisons between their population and others. One straightforward way of making a comparison is to compare Scots with the sum of the English, Welsh and Irish born populations, in order to see how remarkable the Scots were in comparison with other British migrants. Forming a ratio of the two proportions – Scottish and ‘other British’ – for each occupational grade enables us to express the comparison with more precision. From this calculation we find that, in Victoria in 1921, Scottish men were just 1.1 times more likely to be an employer than other British migrants, 1.1 times more likely to be a wage earner, 0.9 less likely to be self-employed or in small business, and only slightly (0.96 times) less likely to be unemployed. The results for Scottish women are similar. They were 1.2 times more likely to be employers than other British women, 1.1 times more likely to be earning wages or salary just as likely to be self-employed or in small business, and 0.75 times less likely to be unemployed.

First, we must address the question of the proportion of Scots who were employers, because this is the only occupational grade that Scots were (slightly) more likely to find themselves categorised in. We can gain more of an understanding of this result by breaking down the British grouping and comparing Scots with the English, Welsh and Irish individually. For men, in order of proportions, 7.3% of the Irish were employers, 7.3% of the Scots, 6.7% of the English, and 5.7 of Welsh. Among women, 1.4% of the Irish were employers, followed by 1% of Scots, 0.7% of English and 0.4% of Welsh. While the Scots were comparatively more likely to be employers than other British migrants as a whole group, the English and Welsh pull the proportion down and hide the higher Irish figure. As it turns out, the Irish men were just as likely as the Scots to be employers, and Irish women were 1.4 times more likely to be self-employed or in small business, and 0.75 times less likely to be unemployed.

The Scots were not well represented in small business: 22.8% of Welsh men were ‘on their own account’, 15.9% of Irish, 13.4% of English, and the Scots were in last place at 12.4%. The margin between women was smaller, with 3.4% of Irish, 2.6% of Scottish, 2.4% of English and 2.0% of Welsh self-employed or in small business. Although the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* is dotted with Scottish business people – 1,532 out of the 14,360 entries (10.7%) are of
individuals with Scottish cultural heritage – most Scots were not in business.\textsuperscript{16} In any case, Australian born businessmen swamped Scottish employers by about 34-to-1 and the English dominated them at a ratio of about 4-to-1. Most Scottish migrants in Australia, then, were working for wages or salary – if they were earning an income.

By 1933, of the 108,756 Scots living in Australia, 3.8% were employers and 7% were living on their own account. Nearly 54% of Scots were deemed as ‘wage and salary’ earners, although only 35% were in full-time employment. Among these Scottish workers, unemployment was at 13.9% in comparison to 4.8% in 1921. Apprentice workers accounted for 0.3% while another 4.8% were in part-time work. These occupational grades did not apply to 56.6%, accounting for pensioners, ‘persons of private means not in business’, women engaged in unpaid domestic labour, students, and other dependents. This census, however, does not provide separate data for Scottish men and women.\textsuperscript{17} The 1933 census provides further insights into the working life of Scots by tabulating income levels for Scottish males and female ‘breadwinners’. As we can see in Table 4, annual incomes for Scottish men in 1933 were rather similar to those of English, Welsh, Irish and Australian born workers. In terms of high-income earners, Australians were more likely than others to take in over £260 and Scots followed in second. On other hand, Scots were slightly more likely than the English to earn between £208 and £259.

Table 4: Male incomes by birthplace in Victoria, 1933

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>No Income</th>
<th>Under £52</th>
<th>£52 to £103</th>
<th>£104 to £155</th>
<th>£156 to £207</th>
<th>£208 to £259</th>
<th>£260 and over</th>
<th>Not Stated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of Victoria, 1933.

These are differences of only a few percentage points – the highest standard deviation among income groups is 1.6% – and this lack of variability points to the similarity of these national groups in regard to employment income, and also
to the absence of a noticeable difference between Scots, other British migrants, and Australians.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, therefore, Scottish men were often found working in construction, mining, and manufacturing, and Scottish women were usually engaged in paid or unpaid domestic labour. While the background of migrants may have contributed to a slight overrepresentation in finance and commerce, in no way was there a Scottish dominance in these occupations. Nevertheless, there are well-recorded instances of individual Scots who made exceptional contributions, but historians should be careful of attributing their success simply to their having been born in Scotland. Most Scots worked alongside Australians and other migrants in a variety of common occupations, although Scots did make a notable contribution to shipbuilding and mining at the turn of the century. Having established the nature and numbers of Scottish workers in Australia, we now turn to their experience of and involvement in the labour movements of the first decades of the twentieth century.

Scottish immigration, workers, and politics during the Great Depression

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.18 Like his father and grandparents, Jim became a coal miner. When he began work, Australian workers were in the midst of an unprecedented labour struggle, during which strikes and lockouts were commonplace, and at the head of which were many prominent Scottish socialists. 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._19

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 increasingly most likely to be from the industrial central Lowlands – Glasgow and surrounds, the Lothians, Dundee and Fife.20 Mineworkers, engineers, textile workers, and their families formed the majority of British immigrants in the 1920s, and the decline of industry after the First World War 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. Assisted passage was given to ex-service personnel from Scotland during these years, and over 36,000, or 42% 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.

In all, 321,000 British migrants arrived in Australia and over 60,000 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. Angus Macdonald 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.’

Those Scottish immigrants who arrived on Australian shores during the late 1920s and 1930s encountered a nation in the middle of a workers’ movement spurred on by the Great Depression. The 1920s thrust by Prime Minister 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 Labor government cut wages by 10% in January 1931, and in the same month Australia’s currency was devalued by 25%. Unemployment was at 13% at the end of 1929, and by the end of 1931 it had reached 23%. The Labor 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, while 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. Sydney Samuels left Glasgow in 1933, and he said of his journey:

*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... When I landed in Australia I was horrified. The Depression was actually worse in Australia when I landed than I’d left Scotland. There were people starving, queues, kitchens, derelicts sleeping in parks. It was horrific.*

As we saw in the 1933 census statistics, outcomes were similar to those of other British migrants and of Australians, especially with regard to income. Nonetheless, the Great Depression in Australia precipitated a unique Scottish contribution to Australian politics and society in the twentieth century. Among
the many Scots who also came to Australia at this time was Watty Doig who, with his wife Agnes, led the first sit-in strike at the Wonthaggi State Coalmine. For workers like Watty, industrial disputes were an ordinary part of life in Australia. ‘I was at Wonthaggi State Coal mine until the big lay-off in 1932,’ he said. ‘Even in the twenties there were continual stoppages. Some would be on matters of principle, some would be spontaneous militancy, no politics in it.’ He continues:

*I came to Wonthaggi from Scotland in the late twenties. After the big lay-off in 1932, we went to Korumburra and I worked in the Sunbeam Colliery. The wages was bad and the conditions ... It was nothing like Wonthaggi, though things were bad there. We didn’t have an Agreement, not even a tribunal to approach. There had been a Wages Board that lapsed. Our fight was to get it re-established, to get increased wages. We didn’t have a minimum. If a chap was in a bad place, he might get as little as six bob a day. At Wonthaggi, the daily minimum was about nineteen shillings and a man couldn’t earn less. The big fight was to get them to recognise unions. It was 1935 and we were on strike, and they had nearly a hundred scabs in. And we had to get them out.*

When the Depression and the workers’ struggle came to a head, among the leaders of the bourgeoning labour movement were numerous Scottish radicals, who had recently migrated from a nation in the vanguard of a new British socialism. But it had not always been this way. As historian, Richard Finlay, has contended, the foundations of Scotland’s political identity before 1914 were imperial and focused on militarism, economic expansionism, the missionary ethic and the role of Scots abroad, and the middle class largely constructed this identity – and exported it overseas. Before the First World War, the perception was that the Empire provided plentiful opportunities for Scots from many backgrounds; historians of the time observed that Scots at home looked upon the achievements of émigré Scots with great pride, and they saw emigration as a testament to the innovative and dynamic qualities of the Scottish ‘race’. The commercial middle class of Scotland saw the Empire as a place of great opportunity where they could exercise their entrepreneurial dynamism and enterprise. Central to the Scottish imperial mission was the presence of Scottish business in the colonies and in the commercial apparatus of the Empire. The significance of the British Empire to Scotland’s economy was exhibited by the description of Glasgow as the ‘Second City of the Empire’ and the Scottish economy as the ‘Workshop of the Empire’. Yet, the impact of the war and its consequences tested these foundations in a number of ways. The Representation of the People Act 1918 almost doubled the voting population of Scotland and empowered all working-class men and women over the ages of thirty-one. The Labour Party slowly supplanted the Liberal Party, and politics progressively became dominated by class interests and attention
shifted to domestic conditions in Scotland.\textsuperscript{34}

Interwar Scotland experienced traumatic social, economic, cultural and political dislocation that caused the Scottish imperial identity to deteriorate into a state of crisis.\textsuperscript{35} For many in Scottish society, the Empire had become irrelevant. Those committed to imperial visions of Scottish national identity struggled to adapt these notions to the new circumstances of post-war Scotland (although, Empire-building Scots would limp through the Second World War and their favourite image of imperial Scotland – the Highland regiment – would linger well into the twenty first century). Replacing the popular imperialism was a new brand of socialism. From the middle of the nineteenth 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 leftwing discourses. In the aftermath of the First World War, British patriotism in Scotland was in decline, and 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.\textsuperscript{36}

During this period, workers recast the historical icons of Scotland in support of their cause. 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 Johnston, characterised Wallace as a radical: ‘If at the bottom of Wallace’s revolt was not a last effort to cast off 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 note that the English saw him as ‘almost a Bolshevik.’\textsuperscript{37} 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.’\textsuperscript{38}

Because of the growing labour movement in Scotland, Scottish immigrants to Australia from the 1890s onwards were increasingly likely to support the Australian Labor Party on arrival, or become part of other socialist or radical groups – union membership and industrial disputes had, for instance, increase dramatically between 1900 and 1914.\textsuperscript{39} On the other hand, migrants who had come to Australia earlier (and their children) were often more conservative, loyal to the Empire, and remained adherents of the view that the Scots were ‘Empire builders.’\textsuperscript{40} Invoking the Hartzian fragment theory of society, Prentis writes:
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.\textsuperscript{41}

The radical labour movement in 1930s Australia, fuelled by the Great Depression, was a fitting environment for newly arrived Scottish radicals. 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, as were many prominent trade unionists. Australian historian, Stuart Macintyre, has written it is ‘a well kept secret that Australian communism was a Caledonian conspiracy.’\textsuperscript{42} British historian, William Kenefick, observes more broadly, ‘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.’\textsuperscript{43}

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.\textsuperscript{44} 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 sporadic and, ultimately, outlawed by governments.\textsuperscript{45} 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. These organisations, and many of the individuals within them, provide examples of the global spread of socialism by migrants from Scotland.

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 CPA and within miners’ 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. Among 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 became secretary and president of the Mineworkers’ Federation.\textsuperscript{46} Jim Comerford remembers one Scottish co-worker who would become prominent in the workers
movement: ‘There was a Scottish bloke, Jock Easton, he boarded with us. He’d been on Gallipoli when he was sixteen and been mentioned in dispatches. He later became a leader of the Unemployment Movement ... They were moderates but enraged by what had happened.’

One well-known Scot to become involved in communist politics in Australia is John Bramwell Miles – Jack or J.B. for short. Jack Miles was born in September 1888 at Wilton, Roxburghshire, Scotland. He attended elementary school in Edinburgh before being apprenticed to a stonemason in the north of England. After finding a job at Consett, County Durham, Jack joined the Independent Labour Party. In October 1911, he married Elizabeth Jane Black. Together, Jack and Elisabeth immigrated 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 Labor Council. He quickly became influential in the CPA.

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 any who resisted. In this time, he was especially critical of middle-class converts to socialism. 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, sometimes paranoid, and influential leader. Jack visited the Soviet Union between 1934 and 1935, and returned to an Australia that was still in the midst of an unprecedented workers movement brought about by conditions in the Great Depression. 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 outlawed 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, however, 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. In the words of Macintyre, these Scots brought their ‘egalitarian zeal’ to Australian workers organisations.49

New and Old Scots: tension and diversity in the Australian Scottish community

It is enough to say here that Scottish migrants in 1930s Australia were prominent in the communist and workers movements that had emerged in defiance of the conditions experienced through the years of the Great Depression. Also important, however, is the position and reputation of these migrants in Australian society. As Kenefick notes, ‘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.’50 To this end, Macintyre writes that in the first half of the twentieth century in Australia, ‘the Scots and indeed other working-class immigrants from the United Kingdom had an ambiguous status.’51 While Macintyre is speaking more broadly, the remainder of this article will extend this discussion and provide specific examples of tensions between the new, radical Scots and the older, established Scottish community in Australia.

In Australia from the late nineteenth century until well into the twentieth century, the popular ideal of Scots was that they were ‘Empire-builders’ and staunch supporters of Britain.52 The Lord Mayor of Sydney claimed in the late 1930s that wherever Scots settled they retained their ‘national characteristics’ and the Scot ‘was always a supporter of British culture and everything that was for the welfare and advancement of his adopted country.’ The virtuous, Empire-building Scots were ‘never revolutionary’, he said.53 Similarly, the speaker at a Rockhampton Caledonian society function said in 1938: ‘In Australia, there were thousands of Scottish people of the second and third generations, and while they were Australians first they still felt themselves to be inextricably and sentimentally bound to Scotland.’ He cites 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.’54 This kind of imperial sentiment was widespread in during the interwar years, and as a result those Scots who involved themselves in the workers’ struggles in the early twentieth century were viewed as outcasts in their adopted land, and by the older, established Scottish migrant community.

As the strongholds of this imperial identity, Caledonian societies were engaged in downplaying the influence of socialism in contemporary Scotland. 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 gave a revealing speech on his attitude to socialism and communism. ‘The Australian fibre is being weakened by economic witchdoctors …’ he said. ‘There were even Clydesiders in that hectic company in the days of depression; but there is something in the Scottish constitution that resists that social microbe with its discontents and fevers … in an unstable world, rocking between Fascism and Communism, Scots at least will shut their ears to all the theoretical blather about a new age and new ways.’ In response to the comments, Caledonian society members – who ‘spoke for all Scots and descendants of Scots’ – toasted their adopted country, and reiterated their loyalty to the British Empire: ‘if the call came, they would willingly go to the aid of the Mother Country.’

Newspaper reports and reader correspondence from the 1930s reveal the lengths to which Scottish Australians and others went in their attempts to exclude radicals from belonging to the Scottish community. Particularly interesting are efforts to ‘exonerate’ Scotland and Scots of the communists through genealogy. In June 1933, an anonymous letter appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* about the preponderance of Irish ‘Sinn Feiners’ holding high offices in the Labor and Communist parties. In response, one P. S. Cleary from North Sydney produced a list of twenty-four leading communists who were ‘maistly Scots’, and asked the original writer to ‘tick off a team of Irish Reds against those.’

The next day an individual, writing under the pseudonym ‘Sardonyx’, claimed that the ‘long list of Communist leaders bearing Scottish names is certainly a staggering revelation.’ The writer continues, ‘Need we accept this list as truly representing unadulterated Scottish blood? Mixed marriages … might put a different complexion on the matter, and supply a reason for this unhappy breakaway from the national character – English, Scottish, Welsh.’

Later on, focus was once again drawn to the prominence of Scots in Communist Party ranks and once again, the purity of their Scottish blood was questioned. Uproar broke out in parliament in June 1945 when Queensland Labor Senator George Martens was railing against Ernest Thornton, the general secretary of the Iron Workers’ Union. Thornton had recently been elected as the Australian Trade Union Representative to the World Trade Union Congress in Paris. Martens announced that if he had his way he would deport all communists, ‘most of whom were Scots.’ He added, ‘the coal mines mostly employ Scotchmen and the worst nests of communists in Australia are Scotchmen. I do not think they had a decent feed until they came to this country … if these people are the savours of mankind as they say they are, why do they not stay and help the countries they come from.’ The claims were described as ‘scurrilous’, and members of the parliament stated that they feared the remarks would cause the Scots in Australia to ‘rise in wrath’.

Reports soon appeared in which Martens absolved the Scots of any liability
for Thornton. Brisbane’s Courier Mail ran an article headlined ‘Thornton’s Genealogy Exonerates Scotland’ in which Martens tells the newspaper he found that ‘Thornton had an English father and an Irish mother – perhaps another injustice to Ireland … I regret I coupled him with the Scotch people and I want to tender my deepest sympathy to both England and Ireland for having been responsible for this excrescence.’ 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.’

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’ known to have associated with communists or communist parties. While the Immigration Restriction 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 - officially 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 and a charge of assault was dismissed. This case echoes a wider movement in the 1920s and 1930s of clandestine paramilitary organisations aiming to stymie the so-called ‘Red’ social and economic reform agendas associated with not only communists, but also moderate socialists such as Jack Lang in New South Wales and E. G. Theodore in Queensland. These groups operated under various names – including the League of National Security, the Old Guard, the New Guard, the White Army, the King and Empire Alliance, and the Returned Serviceman League’s own Anti-Bolshevik Committee – and drew
many leaders from conservatives and senior officers in the Australian army.\textsuperscript{65} That the Victorian Scottish Regiment was drawn into these rivalries is unsurprising given the predominance of ill will toward socialists and communists among ex-servicemen.\textsuperscript{66}

In all, while socialism and nationalism existed in relative harmony in Scotland, the two seemed at odds in Australia, and this was in large part due to the persistence of an imperial vision of Scottish identity. Claiming a common ancestry was not reason enough to prevent tensions from rising between groups of Scots in public life in Australia during the early twentieth century. The dominant notion of Scottish national identity in the 1930s was one in 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 – 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.\textsuperscript{67} Yet, as we have discovered, there was a sharp dissonance between what were viewed as the characteristics of a ‘proper’ Scot and the working-class realities of interwar migration from Scotland.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The primary purpose of this article has been to respond to calls from historians for more attention to be given to the vast majority of Scottish immigrants who were workers, and to those Scots who contributed to the unions and political parties of the working class in their adopted countries.\textsuperscript{68} To this end, we have seen that Scottish migrants made a practical contribution to the Australian economy in the early twentieth century by applying their expertise in shipbuilding and mining to these growing industries. We could also find them sharing occupations with Australians and other migrants. During the Great Depression especially, Scots made lasting contributions to Australian political life. However, the question remains as to whether a Scottish narrative can be legitimately lifted from the broader context of Australia’s labour movement. There was certainly a distinct Scottish contribution to the working class, and to the political bodies representing the workers, which was echoed in most other societies in which Scots settled.\textsuperscript{69} Hindsight provides us with the ability to observe this, but in order to avoid the potential for artificiality we need to demonstrate if and how contemporaries viewed any distinct Scottish contribution. As Macintyre observed, Scottish Australian radicals always seemed ambivalent about locating themselves in a unique Scottish radical tradition.\textsuperscript{70} The coupling of nationalism and socialism in Scotland during the first decades of the twentieth century appears to have not taken hold among Scots in Australia, perhaps because Scottish radicals were received as outcasts in Australian society. They were especially scorned by the
older established immigrants and their descendents who acted as the keepers of an imperial identity that was ossified and disconnected from the realities of working-class Scotland. Thus, the distinction was made at the time: we are not simply artificially extracting a Scottish narrative from the multiple influences that formed Australian society. While the Scots clearly made distinctive contributions to the working class and labour movements, they achieved this on the margins of the Scottish diaspora in Australia.

1 Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Debates, Senate, 13 March 2012, p1614. Cameron has also been national secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union and vice-president of the Australia Council of Trade Unions.


38 James D. Young, *The rousing of the Scottish working class*, p190
40 See note 51.
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