

## Labor People

### Ross McMullin

*Book Review:* Chris Bowen, *Labor People: The Stories of Six True Believers* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2021). pp. +200. \$29.95 paper.

Chris Bowen's latest history book is a multi-biography of six Labor characters he considers under-recognised today. Four were federal ministers: Gregor McGregor, Frank Tudor, John Dedman and Ken Wriedt. Lilian Locke, a pioneering activist, became in 1905 the first female delegate at an ALP federal conference. Gertrude Melville (1884-1959), a Labor devotee throughout her adulthood, was prominent in Sydney municipal politics and the NSW Legislative Council. All are deserving inclusions.

Bowen tells their stories crisply with a consistent structure. For each he provides a brief initial summary of their significance, proceeds to his chronological bio helpfully signposted with sub-headings, and ends with a conclusion reinforcing why they deserve better recognition. He has kept the stories separate and doesn't go out of his way to connect his characters, but those he chose have enabled him to cover in a broad sweep much of Labor's first century. The later bios are longer: McGregor is the first and shortest while Locke, second, is half Dedman's length and much shorter than Melville, who's fifth.

McGregor, Labor's initial Senate leader, is a suitable opener. He was blind yet highly capable and widely esteemed. The Locke story is a gem, a superb model of the revelatory bio that an admirable project like this can illuminate. Bowen highlights her dedicated and effective activism together with her fond connection to a novelist nephew, whose *Careful He Might Hear You* became acclaimed as a film as well as a book.

Bowen praises Tudor for preventing Labor's possible destruction after he became leader in dire circumstances when Billy Hughes led a band of defectors out of caucus in 1916. According to George Pearce, Tudor admitted that conscription was appropriate but his electorate wouldn't wear it; Bowen swiftly dismisses this claim, though perhaps not altogether convincingly.

Dedman, an authentic Labor hero, was at the heart of much that was laudable about the Curtin and Chifley governments. Bowen capably outlines Dedman's influential contributions in a compelling bio that's understandably the book's longest. During Melville's decades of activism in NSW she was, Bowen concludes, 'consistently on the right side of history': against conscription in WWI, against the 'corrupt' 1920s state executive, for federal Labor against the Langites, and against the Groupers/DLP. Her exposure of police brutality after her son almost died in custody is arresting.

To Bowen, Wriedt exemplifies a Labor history truism. 'Every successful reforming government needs' a balance

of big dreamers and down-to-earth providers of 'pragmatic ballast' like Wriedt. He was the Whitlam government's Senate leader who was notoriously not notified of the Dismissal and made crucial parliamentary decisions in ignorance. Debate about alternative scenarios has ensued ever since. Might events have unfolded differently if he had known? Not really, felt Wriedt (whose fury about being uninformed endured), though Bowen has a different view. Wriedt fell out with Whitlam, disliked Hawke and 'reviled' Fraser's government, but regarded no-one with greater contempt than Robin Gray, who was 'the worst, lowest political animal', an 'arrogant' and 'devious' liar.

The intrinsic interest of each story is heightened by Bowen's keenness to emphasise that a situation he's describing was rare or inconceivable today. Examples include a federal leader being challenged for preselection (Tudor); federal conference in effect inviting someone to enter parliament (TJ Ryan); unprecedented government organisation of industry (Dedman); cabinet disunity aired by ministers publishing opposing policy pamphlets (Dedman and Eddie Ward); a fierce public dispute between Labor's leader in the House of Representatives and his Senate equivalent (Whitlam and Wriedt); a federal leader surviving a vote of censure from caucus (Whitlam); and a transfer from federal politics to state parliament involving an immediate ascent to party leader (Wriedt).

There's a welcome index and also a list of endnotes, but they aren't comprehensive. Many direct quotes have no identifying endnote. After reading an interesting quote from Pearce I wondered where he wrote or said it, but was unenlightened. On page 55 Hughes is said to have succeeded Watson as leader (should be Fisher). A football official is referred to as secretary of the 'Geelong ALF Club' in 1949 well before the AFL came into existence. A governor-general and a leading historian are both incorrectly named twice. My book *The Light on the Hill* states that 'public relations techniques were a closed book to him' (Dedman), but this has been reproduced as the purportedly direct quote 'public relations were a closed door to him'; we're all human, but another quotation from a different book has been transcribed inaccurately and attributed to authors who didn't write it.

Few readers, of course, will notice or care about such trifles. But some might be intrigued by the absence of photos either on the cover or inside, a dearth all the more surprising when the aim of this admirable enterprise is to retrieve under-recognised identities from obscurity. Images of Bowen's characters would have sharpened his readers' sense of them (and provided visual corroboration of the author's reference to Wriedt's 'good looks').

At the launch Bowen said he was considering inclusions for a possible second volume. It will be interesting to see who gets a guernsey if this eventuates. Labour history enthusiasts will be hoping it does, as the retrieval of these individuals so little-known today is an extremely worthwhile exercise that Chris Bowen has tackled very impressively.