

Another journey with another Frank

The position of the working class, as understood by the Communist Party, and as depicted by Frank Hardy in *Power Without Glory* and *Legends From Benson's Valley*.

You may think this trivial, but in writing the above sub-heading ('The position of the working class ...') I was unsure which title to put first, although this would seem simple; *Power Without Glory*⁽¹⁾ was published in 1950, while *Legends From Benson's Valley*⁽²⁾ was published in 1963. Problem solved: the first book should come first. But if we look at the stories in the Benson's Valley collection, we see that they include 'The Load of Wood', and if we search a little further and discover the (undated!) *The Man from Clinkapella and other prize-winning stories*, we're told that 'The Load of Wood' was included in the 1946 *Coast to Coast* collection (Angus & Robertson), and most of the Benson's Valley collection feel as if they come from the same cast of mind, if not the same period. The Benson's Valley stories pre-date the outlook of *Power Without Glory*. In fact, the last story of all, 'The Stranger from Melbourne', appears to have been placed at the end of the book for the purpose of making a transition between the worlds of Benson's Valley (Bacchus Marsh, Victoria) and Collingwood (renamed Carringbush), also in Victoria.

Benson's Valley, at the time of Hardy's stories, is in the grip of the Great Depression. It's a small town, it's been reasonably prosperous, but it has an agricultural working class whose people are vulnerable. They've little enough to fall back on, and, although

they're not so very far from Melbourne, their world is cut off. They live in a valley and places like Melbourne and Ballarat are over the horizon. They are peculiarly helpless because, though they may blame wealthier locals like Squatter Fleming and Shire Engineer Tye ('There's only two bastards in this town ... Tye the Shire Secretary and Tye the Shire Engineer'), for their situation, those men are no more directly responsible for their suffering than they are themselves. Indeed, is there a sense in which the Benson's Valley locals are responsible for themselves?

Surely not? Hardy began his writing in a world where there was clearly something wrong, and it might be said that he spent his life telling stories that showed the world's wrongs or promulgating answers to the question of what brought those wrongs into being. Later in his life these simple questions became more complex ... but we will leave discussion of works such as *But The Dead Are Many* to the second of these essays devoted to his work.

Back to Benson's Valley. The economy's depressed, the town's depressed, nobody sees any way out except to leave, but that means either joining all the other jobless tramps on the road or losing oneself in the metropolis to the east where, by all accounts, the problems are worse. Hardy's stories all have at their centre the viewpoint of working men beset by problems they cannot solve. It's beyond them to make their situation any better. This is what makes 'The Load of Wood' so heroic. Darky and Ernie Lyle (roughly representing the author, and even to some extent the

reader) use a borrowed truck to steal firewood one night from a paddock belonging to Squatter Fleming. 'Squatter': this is Hardy making it clear where our sympathies should lie. Noisy as the two men are, with their chopping and splitting, and tossing bits of wood on the truck, nobody interrupts and they get away with the wood. Darky insists that he'll take half and sell it, thus making some money, because he's out for himself, he says, but his actions belie his words. The narrative is simple, obvious, and moving. He tosses bits of wood into the yards of people who need it, keeping only the last two or three for himself. Darky, a thief in the eyes of the law, is shown as a very good Samaritan indeed, and this is probably as close as Hardy the writer ever got to welding his Catholic Christian background to the communism he embraced.

The last story in the collection, 'The Stranger From Melbourne' links the two worlds, or perhaps it provides a bridge from the earlier to the later, larger world where Hardy was to enact his life and find new sources for his writing. It's a simple connecting piece rather than a story in its own right. A bunch of workers – Darky, Ernie Lyle, and the rest – are visited during their lunch break by a stranger selling *The Workers' Voice* at a penny halfpenny a copy. Darky welcomes him with the last of his tea – 'Cold tea and sugar; the working man's champagne.' The visitor is working locally but will soon be going back to Melbourne. He seems to have a broader view of the workers' position than the Benson's Valley men. 'Don't forget to read that paper,' he says to them as he leaves. The narrator scans the paper during the afternoon tea break: 'It seemed to speak of many things remote from Benson's Valley, of new horizons, new

ideas. It seemed to speak, above all, of the stranger. It aggravated a feeling of discontent that had been with me lately.' The narrator sees his valley township differently as he rides home that afternoon. He has to leave, or life will pass him by. The story ends with a passage that might have been written by Alan Marshall:

Suddenly, I knew that I must go away, out into the big world where life was exciting, where people were interested in finer things, where the sun rose over great cities, where people faced the conflicts of life without flinching, where you might even get a decent job.

Conscious of *The Workers' Voice* in his hip pocket, he rides down the hill into town, passing

the familiar signboard: GOOD-BYE TO BENSON'S VALLEY
– A GOOD REXONA TOWN. And I found myself laughing,
head high, hair in the wind, exultant and defiant.

It's his farewell to the place where he grew up and learned at least the basis of his later values, though it's still a long way to the ruthless investigation of John West in *Power Without Glory*, but I don't want to leave *Legends From Benson's Valley* without a look at the first story in the collection, 'The Cockie in Bungaree'. It's a narrative response to a folk-song which begins the story:

'Come all you weary travellers that's out of work, just mind,' Arty MacIntosh sang through his nose. 'You take a trip to Bungaree and plenty there you'll find.'

Arty and the narrator are working for Old Hungry Phillips. They're served beer at the Bungaree pub by a barmaid called Mabel, the pivot of the story. She's nervous, we don't know it yet but she

has a three year-old son in Melbourne, and she's attracted to Arty MacIntosh, and vice versa, yet, ridiculous as it may seem to the two young workers, she's also being courted by Hungry Phillips, and he brings her to his farm, where he treats her miserably, in his wretched, penny-pinching way. Arty looks on with a mixture of confusion and contempt, certain that he has more to give her than the old man. Hardy shows us 'two men and a woman, the triangle as old as civilisation, Mabel waited on Arty MacIntosh with flaunted attentiveness, smiling at his jokes. Old Hungry's eyes never left her.' Two men and a woman; the overlapping triangles are those of class warfare, workers versus their boss, and the wishes of a young woman, conflicted because she's desperate for a place to bring up her child, while she's also intensely desirous of the younger man who wants her. She leaves Hungry in the night to satisfy her passion for Arty, yet not before a scene, a passage, which is unusual in Hardy's writing, where the narrator, going up to the house to fill a waterbag (and to stop Arty precipitating trouble by going to the house himself) sees Mabel naked before a mirror, considering her body. The writing manages to suggest that she is balancing her future carefully, trying, presumably, to find a way whereby she can proceed in these conflicting directions.

She does. She leaves the house in the middle of the night and joins Arty in the workers' shed for an hour or two of passion. Yet she overcomes Hungry Phillips and somehow manages to force him to concede that she will run the household as she thinks fit and then, to the reader's amazement, Hungry gives her ten pounds to travel to Melbourne and bring back her son. He will have a home,

there will be a little money, and Hungry will endeavour, we feel, at least for as long as he feels threatened by the possibility that Mabel may leave him again, to make her happy if he can. The narrative follows Arty and his mate back to Benson's Valley, with Arty still singing lines from that song about Bungaree, a song which Arty announces is banned in future.

I watched him change, grow more introspective, less ironic in humour, less keen on cruel practical jokes, kinder to women.

Neither Arty MacIntosh nor I ever returned to Bungaree.

The story, the first in the collection, is a negation of much, perhaps most, that Hardy wrote later. It's told from the point of view of the two working men, agricultural workers, as in the other tales in the collection, and their opponent in the story is Hungry Phillips, for whom the reader has little sympathy, yet Mabel, by her very presence, implies that neither the Church nor any political movement for the betterment of mankind is of much significance beside a woman's needs; Mabel wants passion, but has an even stronger need for a situation which will allow her to mother her child properly. Hungry Phillips may think that he has triumphed over Arty MacIntosh – in the long run, if not for a couple of hours, one lustful night – but he too is made subservient to Mabel's needs as woman and mother. This is something Hardy is able to imply against the grain of his natural method of storytelling: quite an achievement. The very first of his Benson's Valley stories gives a woman more power and importance than Nellie West ever achieved in *Power Without Glory*, although it could be said that

John West's position at the end of Hardy's book about him is all the more pitiable because of the way he's been able to overrule his wife and children, reducing them to unwilling witnesses to his ghastly, regrettable power.

I am conscious that in making these remarks I am to some extent reading back into Hardy's writings of the mid-twentieth century a feminist, or feminised, way of thinking that wasn't widely available when Hardy's work first appeared. As we will see when we examine *Power Without Glory*, Hardy came to consciousness in Australian-Irish Catholic family circumstances which were later influenced by left wing thought, notably the Communist Party (when there was only one, and it took its orders from Moscow). We have only to go back to the shearers' strikes in 1890s Queensland to be reminded how the Australian working class was willing and able to organise itself to resist the imposition of overworked poverty as its lot; the Australian working class was largely though far from entirely Irish Catholic in origin, and influenced, therefore, by the Church; it also received heady doses of its thought from the international labour movement, notably the Communist Party, an organization which in many of its doctrinaire and hierarchical ways resembled the Church it despised – and vice-versa. These two sources of the radicalism of the Australian working class were always likely to split, to conflict, and Frank Hardy's working life spanned the years when this conflict erupted. It was the bursting bubble, the gaseous fermentation inside the working class which brought Hardy and his work to the surface of Australian readers' attention, he knew this and made the most of it, as we can see if we read not only *Power Without Glory* but

also his reflection on the writing of that book, with its subsequent court case, in *The Hard Way: the story behind Power Without Glory*⁽³⁾, T. Werner Laurie, London, 1961.

One last look at a Benson's Valley story from a feminist viewpoint, before we move on. 'Good as Ever' is again about Darcy, and it's the second last story in the book, immediately before 'The Stranger from Melbourne'. Darcy's daughter Kathleen has been made pregnant by a man called, significantly, Younger. He won't acknowledge responsibility. Darcy determines that for the honour of his daughter he must fight Younger. He does. The fight is brutal. Ghastly. Nonetheless, Darcy is standing at the end, and Younger on the ground, unconscious. Darcy's proved that he's as good as ever he was. He says so, even if he isn't. And what does that matter, we ask? Hardy's last paragraph gives this answer:

With that he turned and led Kathleen into the darkness. His left hand still circled her shoulders as if he thought it could shield her from all the tragedy and sorrow that life held in store.

Darcy's defeat of Younger hasn't helped anybody, least of all Darcy. We assume he'll never fight again. Kathleen's got her life ahead of her and we hope she'll find a man to share her parenting. Perhaps she will. Again, it won't be the Church or the Communist Party that fixes things, though a little faith may help. There's a limit to what can be achieved by systems of thought, however rigorous or carefully created. Hardy's awareness of this, as shown at two crucial points in his collection, make us aware that there's more to this writer than ideology.

This is, I believe, an important warning to consider before undertaking an interpretation of *Power Without Glory*, written, as far as we know, at the behest of the Communist Party. I say 'as far as we know' because the Party left few written records about its decisions, and most of those that existed have long been destroyed or put out of sight. It appears that the Party funded research and Hardy himself for several years. (See chapter 3, 'The Genesis of *Power Without Glory*', in *Frank Hardy and the making of Power Without Glory*, by Pauline Armstrong, Melbourne University Press, 2000.) This matter of the Party's commissioning of the work must join the circumstances of Hardy's criminal libel trial as problematical factors in determining how we, today, read and understand the book. Very soon after the book was first distributed, sheets of names began to circulate, telling readers the *real* names of characters in the novel, the most obvious being John West = John Wren, Archbishop Malone = Archbishop Daniel Mannix, Snoopy Tanner = Squizzy Taylor, and so on. Clearly, those who created these lists saw the book as a *roman a clef*, and we note that Hardy put at the front of the book a quotation from Horace: 'Let fiction meant to please be very near to truth.' This was a daring, perhaps provocative, thing to do. To suggest the book offers (uncomfortable) truths was to put it within range of libel charges, and as everyone knows, the Wren family or its connections were able to persuade the Victorian police and government of the day to resurrect the ancient charge of criminal libel and bring it against Hardy. Hardy was brilliantly defended in an absorbing trial, the evidence against him appeared overwhelming, but to the

amazement of many, inside and outside the court, the jury only took an hour to find him not guilty.

As my head appeared above the courtroom floor, I was struck like a blow on the face with an air of tension. The court had assembled awaiting the Judge and jury. Rosslyn sat pale and tense by the radiator in the corner near the door. Surely the jury hadn't reached a decision so quickly! If it has, I'm a goner! ⁽³⁾

But Hardy was to be amazed. A drink or three later, he became jubilant, exultant. In *The Hard Way*, he says:

We retired to the Cecil Hotel on the opposite corner to the Court, but soon decided to adjourn to the Lygon, our favourite haunt. No matter how long I live, those will be the good old days, the best years of comradeship, of useful work and good cheer of mates together!

Hardy had been cleared, the book could be sold again, and in a way, the nature of the book had been changed ... not forever, but for the generation alive at its birth and subsequent controversy. I think it is still difficult, today, to read the book as if the controversy surrounding its origins and reception had not occurred. It is as if a reader is being asked to take sides with or against Wren himself, the Archbishop, the rogues and the honest men in the Victoria Police, the rogues and idealists in the Australian Labor Party, and to make some decision about the workers in those many years when John Wren's influence could be felt not only on racetracks and in boxing rings but in the legislation that was and wasn't passed in the parliaments of two or three Australian states. Wren had had a hand in so many things. He was, as *Power Without Glory* makes

clear, a man from a poor Catholic background who'd battled his way to wealth and influence via a long and struggle-ridden road, with bribery and corruption at every turn. He used everyone he needed to, and sometimes – Archbishop Malone/Mannix is a good example – he was used, cunningly enough, in his turn. There is a lovely passage in the book about a Saint Patrick's Day parade organised jointly by West (Wren) and Archbishop Malone (Mannix); the Melbourne City Council refuses permission for the march but Wren gets around them by inviting a dozen VC winners to lead the parade, followed at a discreet distance by the Archbishop in his car. The Council, in ceding permission for the march, insist on something they think will gall the Archbishop, but they don't reckon on his guile:

When the head of the procession reached the top of Bourke Street, Archbishop Malone alighted from his car and took the salute on the steps of Parliament House. He stood erect, his heart athrob with emotion. This was a grand day, the answer of Australian Catholics to their enemies – a display of strength which had drawn his flock around him and struck a blow for Mother Ireland. After the returned soldiers' column had at last passed by, he stepped into the car again and was driven to the Exhibition grounds a few hundred yards away. The Exhibition was packed out long before the end of the procession had left the rallying point and tens of thousands could not obtain admission to the speech-making, the singing and the display of athletics and dancing.

Daniel Malone added a sarcastic final touch to his day of triumph: 'We were instructed by the Melbourne City Council to carry a Union Jack at the head of the procession. I could

not get an Irishman to carry it, so I paid an Englishman two shillings to do the job.'

It's worth pointing out that practically all the characters in *Power Without Glory* are depictions of real people; this makes it political in a different sense from Frank Moorhouse's *League of Nations* books, where the foreground is enacted by fictional figures. Reading it as someone half a generation younger than Hardy, but with a reasonable idea of my country's history, I have no trouble identifying characters. Summers has to be Prime Minister Scullin, Ashton is Frank Anstey, Red Ted Thurgood is Theodore, and so on. The actual names of other characters are not known to me, so I read along quite contented to accept these people as fictions, even if they aren't. In other cases I half-know who's being represented, but either because I'm unsure or because I've never known much about these people, I find myself looking at a broad tableau of Australian history and trying to settle on a way of treating what I read in front of me. Fiction or reality? Commonsense would suggest that as the years pass the book will become more fictional to readers who were never part of the realities being described. This means that Hardy has both more and less control over his characters' effect on readers than has Frank Moorhouse, who is rather better placed to manage the effects of his writing. This opens up the question of how certain Frank Hardy was about what he was doing; if you read *The Hard Way*, or had you listened to any of the speeches he made at the time he was trying to sell both the book and an interpretation, a reading, of it to the public, you would feel invited to take part in the class warfare which he says he is describing. As a communist he would

probably have said that he was enlarging readers' understanding of things political, or ridding their minds of the false consciousness imprinted there by the capitalist press, by conservative members of parliament (Labor and National), and so on. But is this what the book does to its readers today, when memories of those years of struggle are fading? I am inclined to read the book, today, in the light of the quotation at the head of Part One: 1890 – 1907 – ROAD TO POWER:

A working man who deserts his own class, tries to get on and rise above it, enters into a lie. (Charles Kingsley)

John West (Wren) was/is a working class man. He became rich and, within limits, very powerful. He bought a splendid home on a hill in Kew, overlooking Collingwood (Carringbush) and had it further extended. He was a neighbour of the Archbishop and although West refuses to practice Catholicism until late in the book, he and the Archbishop have a lot in common, beside their considerable talents for exercising influence. On the numerous occasions when Hardy shows them together we recognise the strange kinship they have with each other, two men manipulating the working class for their own purposes. John West, the book's dominant figure, never leaves behind his origins, desperately as he tries to do so. If he'd given his children more freedom and had the courage to absorb himself in the worlds they opened for him, he might have done so, but he's surrounded at the end of the book as he was at the beginning, by yes-men doing his bidding. In West's mind, there are few favours that can't be bought. At the beginning of the book he lures a policeman into accepting a bribe by spinning

a sovereign into the air in front of him; later, as we see many times, he pulls out a roll of notes or writes a cheque. The sums grow larger as West grows richer, but the approach to getting what he wants hasn't changed. At the beginning of the book, Wren is both desperate and determined; at the end, he is lonely, still trying to dominate, but out of his depth because he doesn't know how he looks to others. They still fear him, he yearns for so much more, yet all those instincts developed for escaping poverty trap him. The grand house near the Archbishop's residence is an unhappy one. No love flows to him from his family. He sleeps at night with a gun under his pillow. In his old age, and his wealth, he's as wary, cautious, watchful, as he was when he was fighting off cops trying to close his tote. All he's ever known is the worst side of human beings. Many, many people along his path have been generously treated by John West, but always because he senses advantage to himself. There's little enough altruism in the man. Protected for most of his life by men we might call hard cases, he is himself a sad case, to be pitied rather than envied. What has he done for the working class he's tried to leave behind? He's given them trotting, boxing, foot running, horse racing, and wrestling, he's corrupted their policemen and their politicians, he's done next to nothing to enrich or broaden their lives at all.

Why not? Hardy shows a man who quite lacks that vision without which, it is said, the people perish. John West is a racketeer who climbs out of the muddy river-flat suburb of Collingwood (Carringbush) to the high land of Kew, from a wretched shanty to one of the city's grandest homes, but it's never been anything

but a selfish, personal struggle for betterment. West changes nothing except for his own advantage. He encapsulates the evils of parasitism, partly because he understands only too well the temptations that lie before those of the poor, who, like him, try to rise out of the situation of their class. Police will take bribes. Politicians need money and they need votes. Both can be delivered. Everything, in the mind of John West, can be bought at a price, and he has that roll of notes in his pocket or his drawer ready to peel off the necessary amounts. Hardy seems obsessed with this. His manner of recounting West's doings is not so much a matter of moral outrage as of fascination. The book contains scores of characters, most of them identifiable from one of those name-sheets, if we can get hold of one – if we feel we need it. Scores of characters, yet it's West who dominates the book.

Why? He challenges both the Church and the Communist Party. They struggle to be clean enough, ideologically and morally pure enough to do their work in the world, and West refuses to be troubled by their castigations, though their political manoeuvres may make things difficult for him. He buys them off, he cedes them things, he seeks their opinions in order to subvert them or get around them, via whatever opening his cunning can discern. In the end, or as a final judgement, I think *Power Without Glory* is a moral tale, showing how hard it is to make life better for any group of believing or non-believing humanity. It's easier, because simpler, to corrupt. Corruption, in the eyes of West, as revealed by Frank Hardy, is more natural than social improvement. There's a lesson to be learned about West, and the society that made him rich, if we look

at his brother Arthur and Arthur's friend Dick Bradley – the only man on earth that Arthur trusts, or likes, or is humanly connected to, a connection brought about by the fact that both these men were lashed when they were in jail. The awful thing that was done to them linked them as long as they lived. I think Frank Hardy the communist might take more pride out of his portrayal of these two criminals than from almost anything else in his famous book. These two men did dreadful things, dreadful things were done in turn to them, and neither could escape what had been made of them, any more than John West could escape what he'd made of himself by buying a mansion on the high ground overlooking his past.

The last pages of the book are very moving, so long as we've stayed with Hardy's portrayal of West loyally enough to see that our sympathy is being called for. West's wife Nellie is in another room, where she's slept, separately, for years. West has had a heart attack and is lying in his bed. He gets his beads and says his rosary, then he remembers the revolver he's forgotten for the first time in fifty years. He hears a piano downstairs and thinks he hears his daughter Mary's voice, though she is dead. He sees his mother before him, pleading with him not to go the way he's gone. He sleeps, eventually, after a fashion, and he cries out in his sleep, beyond redemption. He has, in his own strange way, been brilliantly successful, but it's as clear as Hardy can make it that his life's failed utterly, and there's no hope for him now.

So why did Hardy write about him? Because the Communist Party wanted an expose? Yes, that seems to be what he was asked to do. Because he wanted to show what the Church and the

Labor Party had and hadn't done for the people they purported to speak for? Yes, that seems likely to be the case. Because he wanted to expose corruption and so to advantage the progress of the Communist Party, which, much as it wanted to regulate the thoughts of its supporters, did so on the grounds that they would be led to a betterment, a freedom, that nobody else was likely to give them? Yes, yes, yes, all those things too. But what does the emotional movement of the book, particularly in its third and last phase, Part Three: 1935 – 1950 : DECLINE OF POWER tell us was the heartfelt reason for, the force behind, Hardy's writing of *Power Without Glory*?

I think what Hardy had most need to express, by the time he was near enough to the end of the book to get his final thoughts prepared, was his horror that so much energy and determination to rise above the sadness of John West's poverty-stricken origins could lead to such a morally stricken end. What he has shown us is virtually the opposite of the hopeful thoughts in the young man's mind in the last lines of *Legends of Benson's Valley*: you remember? A young man laughing, head high, hair in the wind, exultant and defiant! *Power Without Glory*, much as Hardy extolled its revelatory qualities to anyone who'd listen – or might buy the book – offers a warning to the world rather than a path to be followed. There's little to be learned from it other than not to do things West's way. We're meant to be shocked and disgusted rather than to find any sign of moral uplift in its pages. It's a condemnation rather than a lesson in positive thought. Reading it again more than fifty years after it was published, it is still extraordinarily strong. When I

first read it, I was a university student of English Literature and I thought it was uncommonly badly written. Rereading it today, I can't imagine how I ever thought so. There are occasional signs of haste and awkwardness, but for the most part Hardy's simple viewpoint and direct expression provide a clear pane between his message and our minds. The book is also a fascinating piece of historical writing, subverting much of the standard way of looking at our country's past. This aspect of the book is so strong that one is inclined to add it to the fact that the novel is a *roman a clef* and say that it's hardly a work of imagination at all, except that Hardy's grip on the limited, obsessive mind of John West (Wren) is so strong that those final pages make us realise how tightly we've been gripped by the man, and how much that grip – an obsession, in turn, of ours – has been created in the mind and feelings of Frank Hardy who, I think we can say, taught himself to write a novel by writing one.

- (1) *Power Without Glory*, Frank Hardy, Realist Printing and Publishing Co., Melbourne, 1950
- (2) *Legends From Benson's Valley*, Frank Hardy, T.Werner Laurie, London, 1963
- (3) *The Hard Way*, Frank Hardy, first published by T.Werner Laurie, London, 1961; quotations from Fontana (Collins) Sydney edition, 1976