



Serious Love

Dare to Dream

**The Memoirs of Tom and Audrey McDonald
Stories of Struggle and Hope, 2017**

\$45 plus postage available from <http://www.aphedashop.org/books/tom-and-audrey>

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Photograph this page: *Tom Mc Donald marches with son
Daren in the 1963 Six Hour Day March*

In her first description of the young Tom Mc Donald, Audrey describes her future husband and life-long partner: "He was a very serious man and we listened very carefully to his advice." In her customary, under-stated way Audrey sums up the feeling of people from all walks of life who have met this powerful and wonderful couple. Tom and Audrey are serious people, serious players and their love created a partnership that is an inspiration for all of us in these times when media and the static of modern life can sometimes drain us of hope and love. They are people to listen to carefully. I think the abiding strength of Tom and Audrey is their ability to reflect, listen and revise their thoughts and adapt their views and actions albeit sometimes slowly from very disciplined and determined practical political and ideological positions.

As I was reading the book I was trying to create a list of Tom and Audrey's achievements, things that they have inspired, been a part of, or directly been responsible for and there are so many that it is quite difficult.

The first set of achievements achieved with their fellow comrades, women activists and unionists are the set of permanent economic and social entitlements that have enabled Australian workers to enjoy the highest quality of life in the world. These include:

- better infrastructure including sewerage for private and public housing
- equal wage rates for women
- child endowment payments
- universal access to affordable health care
- universal access to affordable child care
- permanent conditions of employment for building workers
- full sick pay for building workers
- public holiday pay for building workers
- workplace injury compensation and insurance
- paid skill and apprenticeship training
- a shorter working week for building workers and most Australian workers
- rostered days off for building workers
- industry superannuation becoming available to every



Audrey in Seaham, England after representing her union at the International Food Workers Conference (Bulgaria 1955 aged 17.



*Tom led the last Communist Party
of Australia delegation to Moscow
in 1965*

Australian worker

- Australia's unique minimum wages and conditions system
- safer work sites that have dramatically improved the loss of life and the rate of injury to the extent that they may be a 1000 per cent improvement in job safety in risky industries such as the building industry over the past fifty years
- four weeks annual leave for building workers and
- many other wages and working achievements.

There are a second set of achievements that Tom and Audrey were involved with that have improved the capacity of ordinary people to advocate and continue to struggle for democratic rights and a continually improving Australian and world economy and society. These include:

- trade union training
- International Womens Day
- the trade union Accords of the 1980s and 1990s
- anti-apartheid struggles in Australia and internationally
- Aboriginal Australian causes over many years
- women's struggles in people's liberation movements around the world
- long term supporters of world peace and nuclear disarmament
- union amalgamations (particularly the mormation of the CFMEU) to ensure stronger more effective industry unions
- formation of 'organising works' as an ongoing training program for union and community activists
- life long and passionate supporters of trade unions, the labour movement and many other community organisations.

The third set of achievements is harder to define. It is about the contribution of the left as an intellectual and cultural force. As Bill Kelty said at the launch of this book there was something about the left that Tom and Audrey and others like Laurie Carmichael and Pat

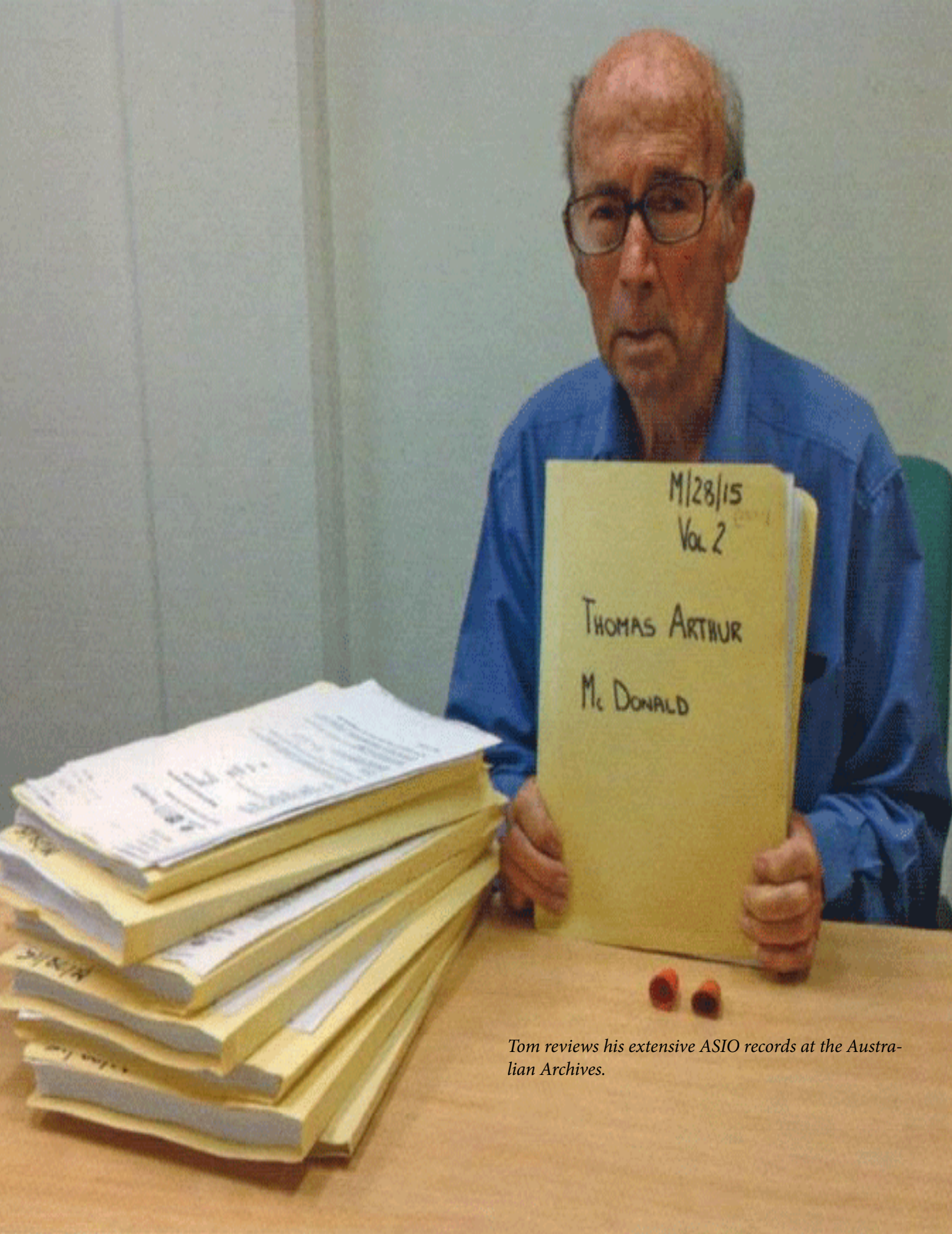
Clancy and their comrades had, that was extraordinarily important for the labour movement, but also for Australian society in general. Audrey quoting Gorbachev says “peoples’ striving for social justice is indestructible” and this was why the left was so important. They were great strategists and either deal makers or deal breakers. If you had the powerful left leaders behind you Kelty said you knew you were solid but also that you had moral strength and purpose. Kelty said he was musing with Paul Keating recently and they realised that they were mouthing opinions that even a decade ago they would have seen as off-the-wall left opinion – a full blown treaty with Aboriginal Australia and top of the range salaries for teachers. It was this ability to set a strategic target over many years and to work for it that was so unique. For Tom and Audrey the challenge never diminishes, at the launch of the book Tom’s speech was full of observations about Bernie Sanders because ‘you have to see the positive at all times and places’. ‘Bernie showed the real America and had unlocked the future for US progressive politics’.

So this third dimension of achievement is less tangible than superannuation and the minimum wage but it is as important. It is about defining a vision and a pathway towards it achievements. It’s what Tom calls strategy. His famous adage is that you can have tactics but if you don’t have strategy you have nothing. His other adage is you have to have militancy with purpose in contrast with the militant anarchy of Norm Gallagher’s Builders Laborers. Tom’s definition of a good union leader is a definition of leadership per se:

“.. the key qualities of a good leader include an ability to bring out the best in people and help them to manage or overcome their weaknesses. A good leader is someone who leads by example, values other people’s ideas, and involves them in decision-making. A good leader is guided by their values, able to analyse issues objectively, and think strategically. They understand that a good tactic is one that advances a strategic objective and a bad tactic results in the reverse. A good trade unionist understands that building workers’ power is central to success but this power must not be misused or abused. Finally, it is someone who respects the right



Audrey welcomes Nelson Mandela to the official Australian reception at the Sydney Hilton Hotel in 1990.



Tom reviews his extensive ASIO records at the Australian Archives.

of the individual but champions the collective interest of workers and communities". p.339

My view is that regardless of the traumatic splits and rivalries of the left it has been a force for good and for democracy in Australia. That is not to say that it has always been correct. Once you move down this path perhaps there is something critical to say about the last decades but with as Tom says a strategic objective in mind: namely recognising the flaws in thought and action and moving to correct them so that the greatness and good qualities of Australia as a nation and Australians as people can be ever enhanced.

The book is structured around alternate chapters written by Tom and Audrey and edited by son Daren – an emerging force in his own right.

Audrey's chapters are often very surprising, even astonishing. In Aboriginal society there are certain stories that are told over and over again by elders because they are so important. I feel this same spirit in Audrey's writing. You have to hear and understand these 'backbone' stories again and again in different contexts and at different times to really get them.

The story of the Union of Australian Women (UAW) is just one of those stories. When you first hear that an organisation of Australian women was formed in the late 1940s it means little against the plethora of women's organisations and our contemporary familiarity with women's rights. Ann Curthoys wrote in the preface to the history of the UAW written by her mother and Audrey "We the young women of the 1970s, had arrogantly thought that we were an entirely new movement; we had to learn, patiently and slowly, that we had many forebears, many foremothers". It is also the case that the broader community has to learn as well. 21 years after the launch of the publication of the UAW history, and by reading of Audrey's experiences, the penny finally dropped a bit lower for me. From humble beginnings Audrey became a major international political organiser. She and her many mentors including Frida Brown made giant strides for women across the globe. I understand well that much of the international work was not appreciated at home. The labor movement had a propensity to think that working overseas was at one and the same time something big but not to be really appreciated and especially not

funded. It is incredible to read of the many powerful international meetings that the UAW women attended and through women like Jessie Street, Frida Brown and Audrey led. The UAW was effectively the precursor of the Australian Consumers Association, a defender of democracy in the darkest period of the Cold War, a major lobbyist for equal work, pay and conditions for women, a pioneer for better public housing including sewerage for the suburbs, cost of living campaigns, child endowment, nuclear disarmament and world peace to name just a few of their major campaigns. On the shoulders of these women the rest of us were carried into the future. It is the resilience and sustainability of these women and their organisations that caught my interest after now nearly a decade of hustling to support Aboriginal enterprises across Australia. For how did Audrey sustain her political work for over forty years with no or little pay and meagre logistical support. I think the answer is that the organisations thrived on the character and passion of the women themselves. Yet with all this remarkable strength and resilience once the activists flagged and, after decades, started to tire, the organisations started also to fade. Could it have been or should have it been different? Perhaps so, but in saying so I know how difficult it was for Audrey to see that the UAW needed to close down. But the idea of a union of Australian women is still equally valid now. Moreover even in retirement Audrey seems to have been equally active and involved in much of the same work she was doing with the UAW. The practical survival techniques and the spirit that allowed the organisation to achieve so much over forty years needs its own story in itself but I think it is the case with so many labour movement organisations that they just needed a little touch of financial investment and business sustainability. Or was it the lack of imagination of those within the labour movement who controlled resources? There is also a lesson here somewhere about the way in which people gave every ounce they had to a cause and left nothing in reserve so that the inevitable drought of interest came around there was little to carry them forward. I think there is also something here about the way in which the collapse of a concept of world socialism also affected the spirits of Audrey and others. There is also

something about leadership succession and the dissolution of a left solidarity culture. These were issues that the new wave of labour movement from the 1970s onwards also struggled with. The rigidity of the old solidaristic culture seemed stifling and yet without it, so much of what we have today would not exist. These were problems and contradictions I had with some of the great mentors I had while working in the labour movement, though never particularly with Tom or Audrey, perhaps because by the time I met them in the 1990s they had come through so much and had endured so many splits and fractures. But with more working women than ever before and with the central role they play in every Australian family and community, it just seems that there should always be a place for a union that unites women across all the spheres of life and work in Australia.

Audrey is just one of those enduring Australian characters. She might have stepped right out of A. B. Facey's ***A Fortunate Life*** because you have to dig very deep to find anything that might have stemmed her enduring optimism about life and people. The young woman who came from Tenterfield and went on to work on a world stage represents the best of white Australia – the common feelings of women across cultures of the world, the focus on the core issues of women and children's welfare as reflective of the health of the society, the care for others in crisis or war or segregation or through discrimination, the possibility of uniting causes across the world through International Women's Day and so much more. These are values that make Australia a great place and their diminishment in the 1990s and 2000s serves us poorly at home and abroad.

For students of the labour movement and industrial relations Tom's chapters are a revelation. They really do take you into the mind of a very conscientious and serious labour organiser. If you read this book and you put it down and reflect on it for a few days you come to feel the love that Tom had for his Sydney CBD and suburban worksites. Nothing was more important to Tom than being one with his rank and file builders. There are a couple of times in the book when you feel his excitement and joy at finding the way to communicate and to receive the ideas from his "rank and file" members. This was the essence of Tom's great



Tom and Audrey at Government House, Sydney after Tom received his Order of Australia in 1994. Audrey was awarded the honor in 1989

strength as a trade unionist and a leader. In some ways he was reluctant and apprehensive about taking over the leadership of the Building Workers Industrial Union from the great intellectual trade unionist Pat Clancy because it meant Tom had to spend less time on site. But what a combination Clancy and McDonald must have been – the deep left thinker and the disciplined work place organiser who of course loved to have a beer and to contemplate the world, at least in his earlier career, from the Star Hotel bar with his mates.

One of the ironies is that it was Tom and not Pat Clancy that was leader of his union, when for the first time in the nation's history, unions were intimately part of national government policy. It was Tom that had to think through the great intellectual and ideological challenges of unionism and socialism within the context of an economy dominated by new world market realities and in which old protectionist structures were dissolving. Tom and Pat Clancy and the labour movement achieved an enormous amount for building workers in the post war years. As he says "By the time I retired building workers had permanent conditions of employment despite working in an industry where work only lasts as long as it takes to put up a building. In the 1940s workers were stood down when it rained; now they can rely on a regular take home pay like other workers. No longer do they receive short pays when they are sick. No longer are they docked rather than paid for public holidays. No longer do they receive half pay when off work recovering from a workplace injury. No longer do apprentices have to go to TAFE in their own time. Today building workers have more civilised amenities. Today they get four weeks annual leave not one. Today the working week is shorter and workers get Rostered Days off (RDOs). Today building workers get superannuation. Today building workers get redundancy pay to help them. ...During Audrey's and my later life we have been able to afford to do most of the things we wanted; although this was helped by the fact that our wants have always been modest. But our parents lived lives of survival. There was little more to life than work and more work raising a family. For my mother there were no holidays or rest days – just a visit to one of her sisters, church on Sunday and occasionally a night playing housie..." pp. 394-5 But in a way these

great achievements might have been weakened, eroded and swept away had the Labor Accord that was developed in the early 1980s and continued through to the mid 1990s not been developed. Even now it is easy to under sell or appreciate the achievements of the Accord. For Tom I think his support for the Accord stemmed from his philosophy of militancy over the anarchy that emerged from his rivalry with Norm Gallagher's Builders Laborers union. **Australia Reconstructed** was probably one of the most under-rated reports of the last fifty years. It created the re-think that allowed the six Accords to be negotiated between the ACTU and the Federal Government. These Accords I believe will come to be seen as one of the most important developments of Australia in the twentieth century. Tom mentions his disappointment that "the Left" failed on several fronts including the struggle against the deregulation of the financial system, the entry of foreign banks, privatisation and the need for a more interventionist industry policy. These were in my view profound but inevitable failures. The very poor quality and high cost of Australia's telecommunications system at present for average families especially in regional and outer suburban areas is a legacy of that failure for one thing. There are also industries such as the car and steel industry that should have been encouraged to radically re-engineer themselves over a longer term. On the whole I believe these failures were a result of the failure of the labour movement to sustain an intellectual arm that was capable of articulating alternatives. It was also a result of the union movement not being able to hear ideas beyond certain ideological or corporatist confines. Much as I share Tom's admiration for Bill Kelty and Paul Keating the ideological and intellectual base of their ideas was very narrow. Union leaders generally were too distrustful of intellectuals and the wages focus of the union movement did not allow broader alliances, even though the social wage component of the Accord was something to celebrate it came only through the received channels of the labour movement. The 1992 New Visions conference which Tom mentions was an attempt to broaden the Accord to include all of the major community peak councils, unfortunately due to the lack of support from the ACTU and the Labor government it did not go far beyond its statement of principles. That was a

disappointment and I think in hindsight a reason why Labor lost the 1996 election. Similarly while the union restructuring that occurred under the Accord was welcome, the failure of the union movement to really look at some of the ideas articulated in **Unions 2001** co-authored by Tom Mc Donald, Peter Robson and the Evatt Foundation was also a major disappointment. To have a greater membership and participation unions needed to look not only at the employed but the unemployed in a capitalist society. They needed to understand and embrace the changing nature of work and provide mechanisms for those outside the workforce to have a range of employment opportunities. In this respect the conservatism of the union movement to represent only their members and to participate in a limited concept of the social wage was a significant failure. The institutions of Australian Labor had turned to inwards on themselves, the unions base was becoming smaller and smaller and the very real voices of the outer suburbs and across the diversity of the society were not heard. Also one of the profound problems of the Australian Federal system namely the over bureaucratisation of government could not be addressed from the perspective of the ordinary citizen. In effect unions and Labor were part of the problem and their inability to reach out to other sources of criticism or feedback was and remains a fatal problem. The Labor Party does not seem to be able to command more than 50 per cent of the electoral vote without the help of minor parties and the reason for this is because of the way in which the solidaristic labor culture often fails to hear anything other than its own voices. I also think that the labor movement has not appreciated enough the fundamental importance of recognising the first nations of Australia. The Mabo decision of 1992 should have been a signal for the labour movement to rally hard for a treaty with Indigenous peoples instead there was simply passive support for native title rights and the main lifting was carried by half a dozen visionary people including Paul Keating but once again with a limited view of what was possible. These criticisms are made with the luxury of hindsight but it is somewhat painful to remember, for example, the Evatt Foundation dinner of 1995 in which a young Noel Pearson first articulated his ideas to the assembled Labor elite without the traction or understanding that

he deserved. The Left had an ideological understanding of the importance of what Pearson was saying but they lacked the practical knowledge of what was happening in places like Cape York Peninsula nor did they know how to really make things happen on the ground nor did they have a vision to go forward with. Is it any wonder that Noel and many of his colleagues started to look more to the conservative side of politics for practical results than to Labor? The common understanding is that Labor was more a symbolic ally than a practical ally in many Aboriginal communities. This general and practical intellectual failure of the left has resulted in the sort of fumbling debate we are currently having about the constitutional recognition of Australia's first nations which lacks the charge and enthusiasm that, for example, Audrey's colleagues were able to inject into the 1967 referendum campaign. It is ironical to me that the Australian labour movement played such an important role in supporting the ANC African National Congress, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the freeing of Nelson Mandela and the formation of a more vibrant South African economy and society and yet have not invested more into the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples and into the development of the Australian Aboriginal economy and society and the support of Aboriginal culture. How is it that Aboriginal workers on missions in many Australian states are *still awaiting for compensation* after decades of working as virtually slave labour? That is simply the tip of the iceberg. Having said all this there is no doubt in my mind that Tom and Audrey McDonald and Tom's close colleague Peter Robson were amongst the greatest voices and minds of the trade union movement and were more open to new ideas and thinking than most of their colleagues.

One of the many interesting discussions of the book is Tom and Audrey's life-long adherence to the doctrines of Marxism and Soviet communism. For ongoing cold warriors, like Greg Sheridan and Gerald Henderson, who continue to dominate our mainstream press and media, Tom and Audrey's book would be unreadable and unforgivable at the same time. What I think this response lacks is an understanding of the rigour and passion of the internal debates that took place, for the most part, peacefully within the Australian left. Tom and Audrey's greatest strength is also perhaps

their weakness, namely their loyalty. Audrey joined the Communist Party in 1956 when the Warsaw Pact countries invaded Hungary. She had already travelled the world and met Elizabeth Mafeking which influenced her life-long involvement with the African National Congress. I can understand why both Tom and Audrey were inspired by the Soviet Union. Communism enabled them to see the great diversity of the world, to study and think and most of all it gave them something to believe in. Both admit that they saw too slowly the tragedy and weaknesses of the Soviet Union and were both doctrinaire in their appreciation of the quality of for example Jack Mundey's environmentalism and the more radical elements of Women's Liberation. Notwithstanding the proud tradition of opposing Soviet expansion by the Communist Party of Australia the fact is many in the left were a bit too starry eyed about the East. It has been quite a stark realisation for me to realise in recent years that every one of my Russian ancestors – the Botsmans of St Petersburg – were killed in or around 1917 or in WWII or its aftermath. The only survivors were my great, great grandfather who left St Petersburg as a sponsored silversmith bound for the gold fields of Ballarat and Bendigo and the family of my distant cousin who lives in the Ukraine. With this new knowledge it was poignant to travel late last year to the Czech Republic and see the little plaques on houses in the old square of Prague for those who stood up to an unwanted communist dictatorship and national annexation and gave up their lives in the most trying circumstances. These little people were tortured, bullied and ultimately murdered. I came to understand a little of the stoic and modest, heroic qualities of the Czech people and their courageous non-violent Velvet Revolution of 1989. Five years earlier than this Tom and Audrey had resigned from the Stalinistic Socialist Party of Australia but they continued to admire the USSR partially because of its support for the South African National Congress and other international peoples' struggles. Gorbachev and perestroika were I think what galvanized their critical views much later than most. I remember when the Evatt Foundation sponsored the trip to Australia of Gorbachev's main and courageous economic adviser Abel Aganbegyan – the two most anxious to meet him were his Armenian country man Rene Rivkin and Tom and a delegation from the Build-

ing Workers Union. Rene gave him a trip around the harbour on his boat, Tom I remember gave him quite an intense grilling. It was my first contact with the great Tom McDonald and his brother Don and Stan Sharkey and I must admit it was interesting and unforgettable. I of course as a student had been a part time builders labourer and a great friend of Bobby Pringle the former President of the BLF and have many close friends and comrades who would have been on the other side of the fence during the momentous Green Ban years. My sympathies were elsewhere during that entire period but I knew there was something about Tom. He was the kind of bloke that you could respect and listen to and it was ultimately he who succeeded over the Gallagher forces that had been responsible for the demise of the Munday forces. For the record I know that Tom and Audrey if ever personally confronted with tyranny or oppression would oppose it unconditionally. Bill Kelty sums it up pretty well: "Tom and Audrey are inspiring. At the same time, they demonstrate the truth and falsehoods of one of the world's great revolutionaries, Lenin. In so doing, they put on show the agony of choice between ideology and achievement, the immediate and the long term and words versus action. There is not one person in this country untouched or unaffected by Tom and Audrey's life long political pursuits". It's so true.

Bill Kelty on his day is one of the best speakers I have ever heard. I remember sitting beside Tom and being mesmerised by his words and presence on several occasions in the late 1990s. His mate Paul Keating had a similar effect. It probably made us reluctant to approach them and tell them a few things that needed to be said. But I guess we did manage to get a few things across from time to time. Kelty in my view was the greater orator by a touch although Keating in the Federal parliament was a sight to behold and savor. The problem with Kelty is that you cannot hear his words or read his sentences once. As Tom says Kelty was one of the great off-the-cuff speakers and he disarmed you and charmed you. But you must hear or read his speeches a few times to hear his depth. If there was ever a speaker who you would like to record and transcribe it is Kelty. A volume of his collected speeches would be worth having. One of the things Kelty said in launching the book was that it was hard to be a communist in Australia after WWII. It's

something to remember and perhaps it also explains a lot that Tom and Audrey were reluctant to draw attention to. As usual Kelty was talking about something that was between the lines of the pages. Communists and trade unionists like to talk about "struggle". It's a loaded term and I'm not sure that "struggle" is such a great way of conceptualising a forward strategy. But there is something here that refers back to Tom's concept of strategy and being clear about objectives and values. As he explains it "From day one to the end of my union life there were always three fundamental values that I saw as central to the struggle - the dignity and rights of working people, the future of humanity and empowering the working class". p. 396 One might differ with elements of this thought but it has been undoubtedly a winning formula for working people and has laid the foundations of Australia's modern economy and society.

In conclusion as Bill Kelty writes in the foreword of this great book: 'Tom and Audrey's story is the story of contemporary Australia'. It tells us what makes us great and good. Because of its overwhelming and unerring passion it also tells us where our weaknesses and blind spots are as well. For these reasons the book really should be studied and debated. It would be great to see it read by a wide audience such as a Year 12 Australian history text. It is great to have this volume for labor and community activists to reflect on, it is a must have book for labour movement thinkers and historians and is an inspiring story for young people thinking about social change, community leadership and politics. In other words there is something in this book for every one. I hope readers of this review will go out and purchase a copy. Profits from the sale of the book will go to Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA