There is a vast amount of material, published and otherwise, relating to the history of the Communist Party of Australia/CPA (1920-1991). Examination of the footnotes to Stuart Macintyre’s first volume of the history of the CPA, The Reds (1998), attests to this, as does familiarity with the two resource bibliographies of CPA related materials compiled by Beverley Symons and others (1994, 2002).

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, autobiographies by former Australian communists contributed what might be termed a genre, the most outstanding of which from a literary viewpoint was Serpent’s Tooth (1984) by Roger Milliss. Historical interest has not dissipated, with recent biographies of communists Aileen Palmer, by Sylvia Martin (2016), and Freda Brown, by Lisa Milner (2017); an essay collection The Far Left in Australia since 1945 (Routledge), edited by Evan Smith, Jon Piccini, and Matthew Worley, is scheduled for release in 2018; the second volume of Stuart Macintyre’s History of the CPA is a work in progress.

Despite all this, Australian history and its gatekeepers are reluctant to acknowledge/accept the fact that in its heyday in the 1940s, early 1950s, the CPA was a major Australian political and cultural force. Instead it is variously relegated to the realms of social irritant, gadfly, misconceived idealism, political eccentricity, far leftism, indeed any number of side-tracks bar it was, by any mode of analysis, statistical or otherwise, a major and significant political formation, which conservatives of all hues had every reason to be concerned about.

The anti-communist conservative Prime Minster (1949-1966) Robert Menzies was astute. Sure, he cynically understood anti-communism was a useful electoral tool, but he also understood the political reality: that for conservative agendas in Australia to be untrammelled and have the best chances for success, and for the capitalist state to be free from serious opposition, then the CPA had to be neutralised, preferably eliminated. Which is what he systematically, often creatively, attempted.

Sympathetic histories of the CPA variously contribute to the marginalisation of the party as a significant political formation. Some histories are written in a gendered way, with males as the political actors, when the fact is that women were a major part of the party, not just bit players. Other histories reflect the ideological backgrounds of the historians, with anti-Stalinism in the fore, the focus the interplay/conflict of national and Soviet influences. Some liberal historians wrestle with the problem of how it was that well-meaning idealists got suckered by Stalinism, or were caught up with the ‘romance’/’nonsense’ of revolution. Common to many histories is the simplistic depiction of the CPA in a top-down way, authoritarian, capable of about-facing at any time, centrally and rigidly controlled, the historical emphasis on the leadership and the well-turned soil of an oft visited biographical canon.

What tends to get lost in all of this, thus assisting the historical marginalisation process, is that the CPA was a very human grass roots organisation, workplace based, urban and suburban, with local and regional differences, linked by an extensive and vibrant print culture, and that for many of its
members, committed in ways that modern Australian political parties can only dream of, the party was the focus of their daily lives as political and social beings, and as families, children included. American literature has coined the prefacing term ‘red diaper’ to denote those children who were raised within this sort of milieu. Australian CPA histories with a family focus and women as key players, not just as extras, are as scarce as hen’s teeth.

Enter Stephen Moline and his genre crossing biographical study, Red (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017), a lengthy work running to over 500 pages. The publisher’s blurb gives little away about the author, except to say he was raised and grew up in the milieu dealt with in the book, and ‘kept a notebook’. It takes a bit of research to find Moline is author of some 80 books for young readers, and for educationists, that he was education publisher at Methuen for ten years, is an acknowledged international expert on ‘visual literacy’, and has contributed to small magazines like Griffith Review, Island, Overland, and picked up a Katherine Susannah Prichard Short Story Prize in 2004.

Red is the fictionalised historical account of the author’s parents, Paul (journalist) and Lesley Moline (artist), with the emphasis on Lesley whose life ends in the 2001 at the age of 90. Using his parents as the focal point, it is an exploration and account of aspects of Australian cultural and political life largely absent in other narratives. This is achieved via exploring and detailing the lives and thoughts and work/s not only of the Molines, but of their friends and associates as well.

The Molines were politically radicalised during the 1930s, and became members of the CPA. For much of the time Moline writes of, the CPA membership was rich in personalities either well known in Australian history, or who should be. Many significant intellectuals, artists, authors, poets, actors were part of/passed through its ranks during the 1930s through to the 1950s and the party had an extensive and rich cultural environment, a crucible that helped shape modern Australian culture and history in many ways. Through the Molines, Red explores this cultural milieu, and the junctures of families, politics and culture.

One of the main characters in Red is Bill Wood (1911-1976), son of liberal dissident historian George Arnold Wood (1865-1928), the first Professor of History at Sydney University. Bill was a Rhodes scholar, pacifist, nonconformist Christian, who was radicalised in the thirties, joined the CPA in 1940, and became a prominent activist, journalist, intellectual, wit, editor, with a significant following and influence, but not in an egotistical way, ending his days working in Fisher Library, Sydney University. Despite having been in his day a fine and elegant writer, a high profile activist, highly regarded and influential, Wood is largely absent from leftist histories in any meaningful way.

Moline’s recreation of Wood, and his restoration of Wood to the historical record, is one of the features of Red. In many ways, the book is an intellectual history from below. Moline’s parents were essentially rank-and-file CPA activists, currently warranting minor footnote references and passing mention in political histories and art catalogues. That said, through them Moline brings the full and rich lives of these activists, and many like them, to life, demonstrating their historical agency. It is also an account of the author’s ‘red diaper’ growing up and development within this milieu, and an intimate yet unsentimental exploration of political belief/faith/vision, including at key times of political turmoil (1956, 1968) which drastically reduced the membership of the CPA, contributing to its ultimate demise as a political formation.

While Moline’s work is in the form of a novel, it is based on extensive research. Detailed endnotes explain his sources, including his deep trawling of archival materials not previously used by scholars, and oral materials. This research, from a scholarly viewpoint, is hugely rich and impressive.
Some fifteen years in the research and writing, which no doubt encompassed the author’s creative endeavours to find a suitable genre to enable him to carry off what he was seeking to do, the overall achievement of Moline’s *Red* is akin to that achieved in the context of the British Communist Party by Edward Upward in his classic novel trilogy *The Spiral Ascent* (Heinemann, London, 1977), a truly original piece of literature, in many ways a political prose-poem.  

Moline has a blog about the book, ‘Red the Book’ at [https://redthebook.wordpress.com](https://redthebook.wordpress.com), which has visual material on it relating to the book and its characters. Apart from whetting the interest of readers, this is shaping up to be an historical resource in its own right.

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3 The significance of the CPA, and the role of its print culture, are the subject of Anthony Ashbolt and Rowan Cahill, “‘And the lives are many’: the print culture of Australian communism”, *Twentieth Century Communism* (12), pp. 37-61.


5 Professor G. A. Wood became a controversial public figure during the Boer War, which he opposed as an unjust war. His activities led to him being censured by Sydney University’s governing Senate.