YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

By Rowan Cahill


In the tradition of E. P. Thompson, redolent of the work of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, Michael Quinlan’s The Origins of Worker Mobilisation: Australia 1788-1850 is magisterial and exhaustive. ‘Magisterial’ because it is game-changing in regard to understanding Australian history. ‘Exhaustive’ because its sources are rich and inclusive, and the trawling and interrogation of these deep and thorough.

Origins is the sort of historical research/writing the modern neoliberal university is structured, either by design or as collateral damage, to variously frustrate or prevent. Quinlan has worked three decades on this book. It is ‘slow’ history, as opposed to the fast-food production of scholarship demanded by the neoliberal academy, and the quick-change processes involved in the competition for research grants. An older scholar, Quinlan’s roots are in a time before the straps and buckles of the neoliberal straightjacket were fastened, and like Houdini he has managed to shrug free.

In a nutshell, Quinlan establishes the existence in Australia of a hitherto hidden and rich history of industrial action by working people during the period 1788 to 1850. The body of evidence he assembles radically challenges the long held perception by conservative and radical scholars that significant worker mobilisation was unique to the period after 1850 as the colonies variously shook free from their convict pasts and moved towards self-government.

In Quinlan’s hands the achievement in Australia of most of Chartism’s democratic demands well ahead of the Britain of their origination, and Australia’s world-leading social progress trajectory in the latter half of the nineteenth century, are not post-1850 specific as traditionally accepted, but built on the shoulders of a rich and vigorous history of working class agitation, dissent and mobilisation during the first half of the nineteenth century. Post-Quinlan, we now have a whole nineteenth century of class politics, dissidence, contestation, mobilisation, rather than a quietist century that dissentingly and democratically came to life following the post-1850 discovery of gold and the end of the convict system.

Quinlan begins by regarding the Australian colonial administration as a ‘state’ positioned in two inter-related projects: British imperialism, and the development of capitalism. Geographical factors determined that the lifeline for each was the sea, the whole project linked globally to trade, to movements of people and capital, and involving intensive labour, unfree (convict) and free.

Proceeding in an ‘industrial relations’ (IR) manner, Quinlan examines the huge, complex, and diverse raft of governing labour laws and regulations that developed to further these projects, the common factor that they protected and privileged employers and capital while disadvantaging labour, often severely and punitively so. Quinlan demonstrates how this labour/legal regime was variously contested, challenged, at times ameliorated, by working people, unfree and free, male and female, European and non-European, across all industries and occupations prior to 1850.
Other scholars have variously been here before, notably Terry Irving whose *Southern Tree of Liberty* (2006) demonstrated significant political mobilisation by workers in the 1840s. Quinlan acknowledges intellectual debts and the shoulders on whom he stands. But his unique and monumental contribution is the documentation of worker resistance, dissent, contestation, and organisation from 1788 through to 1850. This is why his research took so long, the bulk of his data only gathered via the systematic and consecutive deep reading over a seventeen year period of the colonial press, along with official and personal records of all kinds.

Included in this was a wealth of ships logbooks, enabling the recreation from ‘below’ of merchant ship voyages of all kinds, and the rich history prior to 1850 of resistance by maritime workers in the context of Australian colonial jurisdictions against conditions and legislations more barbaric and punitive that those experienced by land-bound labour. Prior to 1850 the merchant marine and whaling contributed more industrial action proportional to the size of its workforce than that of the shore-based workforce.

Overall, across industries and occupations, Quinlan’s work ends many historical silences, and gives life and voice to the names, events, places, sites, and the geographies, of resistance. The overwhelming bulk of this data has been ‘unknown’ since first documented in colonial times.

Quinlan began his research manually, and was later assisted by computer technology. Via the National Library’s Trove digitisation of the colonial press and the employment of a diversity of search terms, his trawling of the past went very deep. The result was a data base of some 6426 industrial actions during the period. Quinlan says this number is probably 60-70% of what probably existed, and will expand as more records turn up, and as the interrogation of existing records matures. In tandem with computer technology, the data base enabled the generation of thirty-nine tables and figures that bolster Quinlan’s account, providing a perspective of Australian colonial IR prior to 1850 never previously available.

Central to Quinlan’s data collection is what he classifies as industrial action and mobilisation. He is not on the lookout for the sort of mass actions associated with the second half of the 19th century and trade unionism. In his approach, a strike is the withdrawal of labour by two or more people, and this includes tactics like absconding, desertion, and other forms of action. Because of legal restraints/constraint, and the punitive disciplining of labour, significant planning most likely went into the smallest of actions to prevent discovery in the planning and to limit punitive fallout.

A key employer/state tactic of the time was to punish ringleaders in order to intimidate others. When officially reported, industrial unrest thus appeared to be limited to a few, masking its extent. As Quinlan explains even the smallest of industrial actions was, in all probability, the work of a larger collective, and industrial actions have to be understood in relation to the legal regime of the time and the organisational/employment system in which they occurred.

Quinlan’s sees much in common with today’s world of work and the period he examines. He writes with the radical certainty that those who are oppressed can only redress their grievances by making those who rule uneasy, with even the smallest actions contributing to this unease. All of which, collectively and eventually, makes a difference. Overall, Quinlan’s book is testament to the possibilities and persistence of dissent and rebellion despite draconian and oppressive hegemonies that would have it otherwise – yesterday, today, and tomorrow.