

## **Moments in Time: From the Shearers' Strike of 1956**

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Chance and opportunity play a very important role for each and every individual in both their social and working lives—not merely by operating in significant moments in time, but often they act as catalysts for noteworthy development in, or modification to, the socio/cultural order of both an immediate or greater society.

The abiding and iconic significance of the 'Labor Tree' in Queensland's Barcaldine came from / was the result of a prolonged and desperate Labour versus Capital dispute in the early 1880s, an event which became a benchmark in Australian socio-political history. The often spiteful, and always painful, dispute was really about a system of class distinction, one which was being forced to give way to the progressive views of the various pioneers who were searching for a new social structure—one which saw that the realities of distance, environment and diversity gave cause for a new order, one beyond their previous experience in the old country.

The confronting circumstances of the 1956 Shearer's Strike were brought about another attempt by the long fading 'squatocracy' to reduce the wages of the shearer and, therefore, of all rural workers. For, if a shearer was prepared to sign on at the new rate (lower than the old rate per 100 sheep shorn), then the graziers were even prepared to pay those shearers more than the old rate per 100 sheep. Iniquitous, of course, but a definite attempt to dictate to the common worker the employers and brokers opinion as to his value or/and his social station in Australian life.

The firm, Grascos—who then sided with the immediate pastoral employers—had contracted to shear Midkin's sheep at the new rate, and the team they brought in was heavily weighted with the more mobile New Zealand shearers who had little perception of the moral values under stress at this time.

As in the case of 1892 and the Australian Worker's Union, the more recent Midkin dispute became bitter and violent. Shearers of the day, including some who were exhibition-shearing at the Moree Show, had then gathered together and marched on the Midkin Shearing Shed to make a statement and to stop the shearing. They were led by Col Newsome, Union Rep., and supported by shearers of note such as

Rodney 'Gus' Brazel and other well known shearers and identities in the area—another of whom was one Keith Garvey, shearer and later a well known writer and raconteur.

They were met by various armed farmers and graziers who were hastily gathered together there to protect the implementation of the new order—one of the conditions of unemployment and remuneration. These men were armed with rifles and shotguns and other weapons, and they were, by all recollections and oral accounts, ready and willing to use them.

As the strike progressed and became nastier, newly arrived 'shearers', some of whom had hardly ever seen a sheep, had arrived in Moree and were more than prepared to 'sign on' at the new rate, because of the big rewards offered them. One of these men received a severe kicking upon arrival at Moree, by an angry mob who saw them as 'black scabs', unfit to be alive.

Many families there were starving, as no rural work was allowed in any form to any known shearer—not even fencing or the digging of trenches. Feelings ran high, and for many years after those who worked at the new rate (the scabs) were ostracized by those who supported the Union Ban. And so Moree was a town divided three ways:

- (1) those who supported the Union;
- (2) those who supported the employers; and
- (3) those who, for reasons of opinion/ belief or who did not want to see their families or themselves go hungry, worked grimly in the face of the solid union opposition.

In Queensland at the time, the Shearer's Award allowed for a reduction in shearer's rates, at a time when the price of wool, a drought, or serious and wide spread economic circumstances, might / would ordain a reduction. The New South Wales Farmers and Graziers groups / affiliations saw such conditions as an ideal way of reducing what they saw as exorbitant payment for 'common labourers', i.e. the sheep shearers.

Keith Garvey and also Col Newsome were part of this moment in pastoral industrial time. You could say that they were movers and shakers... Col because of his official position and his great compassion for the underdog or down trodden, and his magnificent attitude to fair play and equal consideration—Garvey because of his oratorical skills and his already known and established ability to hold an audience, mesmerically even.

As with William Shakespeare in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when writing about the immediate socio-political events of his time, that of Elizabeth I—so commenting on the union activity in the

aftermath of the strike could easily have brought serious repercussions for Keith Garvey, for most local feelings about this financial, and socio-political, clash ran high for many years following the 1956 upheavals.

Many of the participants of the Midkin Strike were still around Moree and Keith lived within the area with his / these Moree and 'Pally' (Pallamallawa) folk. The stories he told of 'My Uncle Harry', Stevo and Co. were about people of an earlier generation and told in the manner of yarning to a young learner apprentice or student of the bush about what we can see was earlier established folklore and custom. Yet they always had a bite, an urge to suggest the need for freeing the workers from the old restraints, and to ever remind them of their democratic rights in this new land.

The workers' courage and the attitudes faithfully and proudly reproduced at Midkin were the product of a generation who grew up with retrospective vision of hardships and pride in the hard won achievements from an earlier era. The 'stand-up-and-fight-for-your-rights' aspect—one fiercely upheld by the members of the Worker's Union and respected as a necessary demonstration of one's membership of that section of both trade and social strata—was again brought to the fore against (as Keith would put it) the Imperial might of the 'arrogant British Aristocracy'. This shearer's strike, started at Midkin in 1956, had long-term effects and ramifications for the future of the Australian Wool Industry, as well for as the socio-cultural / political landscape and for the managing of industrial relations, pressures which are still being felt to this day.

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The next significant moment in the life of Keith Garvey and in turn, Col Newsome, was the change of career path of Richard Saint Vincent Welch in about 1960; 'Dick' Welch as he was more commonly known, was working for Elders in their stock department and was a regular attendant at the various stock and clearing sales in the fairly large district surrounding Moree. Keith Garvey was a casual rural worker and cattle dealer at that stage of his life, as he had eased up on the shearing of sheep, due perhaps to a bad back. Keith used to travel around a bit with Dick Welch who enjoyed listening to his yarns, tall tales and recitations. (For Keith had a phenomenal, even perhaps photographic, memory for the text and nuances of verse read, and for the same aspects of poems, doggerel, and yarns as they were told.) When Dick moved from the pastoral firm, Elders, to the Australian Broadcasting Commission in Moree, he was asked by the Country Hour's Colin Munro if he knew any storytellers or local muses who would be able to supply short 'bits' for fillers on the ABC Radio Broadcasts. So the association began between the ABC and the endless Garvey repertoire.

Keith's education was not up to the level required for presentations in dialogue or script form, so pieces were polished and enhanced by Dick Welch from the perspective of a degree of (necessary) public acceptability. Keith, used to presentations at shearers' and/or rural workers' gatherings and around stock camps, was at times, shall we say, a little rough around the edges. However, Dick Welch's director at that time was none other than the legendary Colin Munro and, no doubt, the lining up of Dick and Colin was the catalyst for the soon-to-burgeon career of Keith Garvey as both published and broadcast bush poet. And later, in his golden period, he would become the writer of highly significant and atmospheric border country prose.

The present writer of this essay is not completely aware as to whether Col Newsome was a writer of poetry and prose prior to his association with Keith Garvey, but both their literary efforts would have been encouraged and enhanced by their association. Col Newsome, better educated and probably more public-minded than Keith, was a man of the people, a man of conscience, and possessed of a sharp historical awareness, and he was always was a champion of the underdog.<sup>1</sup>

His strong interest in the bush-ranging era and the manner of its passing, suggests that he saw many of those particular figures were more victims than perpetrators. Col Newsome was much more intent on doing what he considered to be right rather than only writing or speaking to the immediate subject or issue. For this aspect of his life and also for many other personal attributes, Col was much respected and revered by friend and foe alike.

This dedication that Col felt to his fellow man—one perhaps limned in tribute by Keith in the fictional figure of Black Jack Carmody—was one highlighted for us much later by his daily attendance during Keith's long and eventually fatal illness at Glen Innes in the 1990s. For Col attended daily to make sure that his friend and long-time companion lacked neither physical of mental nourishment. This was the code he lived his life by and it earned him a lifetime of respect and admiration.

#### *And Who Would Read Them?*

One of the problems of the Newsome/Garvey publication situation was that neither writer was mainstream, nor were they really concerned with the lifestyles of Australia post-World War II, and the distribution

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<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested to me that one of Keith's stories, 'The Night O'Meally Called', pp. 190 ff in *Slowly Sweats the Gun* (1981)—with its flashbacks to 1863 and the shooting of O'Meally when he was on a raid with Ben Hall and Gilbert on Goimbla Station, and then of the desecrating of his corpse—is very much in the style of Col Newsome's compassion for many of those almost forced into bushranging.

This, too, is like the sympathy for Thunderbolt the man in Judith Wright's novel, *Ride the Mountains Wide* (1961), which it seems that Keith may well have been influenced by.

pattern of their books almost precluded widespread readership. For too often—and especially in the styles of Australia’s conservative publication for several decades more—their style precluded their reaching the major city distribution systems. For it is a truism that the writer with the best publication / distribution system receives the higher accolades, regardless of the quality of their writing or of their subject material’s historical, moral or literary significance.

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In the case of Col Newsome, humanitarian and champion of the underprivileged or vulnerable, his core themes were moral courage and the integrity of the personal code by which he lived his life, whereas, in the case of Keith Garvey, there is much more of the rest of us all to be found in so many of the figures. A little of the rogue, suffused with some larrikin, a need for female company, melded in with a large tad of the rebellious, combined with a little of the courage, desperation and human endeavour to be found in all, or most, of the common folk.

If particular irregular behaviour had been tolerated, or could be got away with in the rural landscape, Keith Garvey had done it or contemplated doing it, the just legal and the not so legal included.

His themes were many and varied, but it seemed, when one generalizes, that he was concerned to find the best in the common man, be he rich or poor, high born or on the bottom rung. He saved his venom especially for those who feasted on the lesser one’s human frailty and condemned those, absolutely—notably politicians, clergy, and the police—who abused their powerful positions or moral trusts coming with their authority.

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It could be reasonably said that each author was largely concerned with his experiences and so his work is very much the product of his own thoughts, observations and personal efforts to assist in keeping up the spirits of their fellows. In the case of Garvey, his inner self was represented, in part at least, through the whole wide spectrum of almost all of his Australian born / bush characters either by their assertive actions, or those services and the personal or societal compassion which he/ his engaging and recurring creations aimed to practice and celebrate.

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