



Robin Allenby Gollan
(1917–2007)

Robin Allenby Gollan
(1917–2007)



The Depression was a formative experience for many Australians who came of age in the 1930s and who never forgot the hardship and humiliation it inflicted. The Second World War was their time of sacrifice but also a time of hope for a better world. Postwar reconstruction implemented plans to banish unemployment, poverty and insecurity, including the Reconstruction Training Scheme that enabled these ex-servicemen and women from humble origins to pursue their studies and fulfil their talents. The Cold War dashed the earlier hope, and also exposed those on the left to intense suspicion.

In his book *Revolutionaries and Reformists* (1975), Bob Gollan gave the best account of this era of intense ideological conflict and rapidly changing political fortunes. Like all of his writing, it is marked by a breadth of perspective and clarity of exposition. His empathy for the subject is clear and so too is his objectivity. He does not evade the errors and excesses of the left-wing activists, for he seeks to learn from the past.

Furthermore, it is his own past. He was born just a few years before the narrative begins in the 1920s; his youthful experience of the 1930s led him to the Communist Party of Australia and the book ends in 1955, just as he was about to leave it. He was a beneficiary of the postwar expansion of Australian universities. And he was the senior member of the generation of radical historians – it includes Russel Ward, Ian Turner, Miriam Dixson and Eric Fry, who died just before his colleague – who broadened Australian history to incorporate the experience and aspirations of the labour movement.

Robin Allenby Gollan was born on 8 December 1917, the day news reached Australia that Jerusalem had fallen to the Australian Light Horse under the command of General Allenby. His father William's family came from northeast Scotland and settled Woodburn, on the Richmond River, following the Selection Act of 1861. His

mother, originally Jeannie Maclean, was also of Scottish descent. Both were members of the Salvation Army and Jeannie worked for it on the Western Australian goldfields before marriage.

The family moved during Bob's childhood, first to a dairy farm at Dorrigo, later to a mixed farm on Cambewarra Mountain, inland from Nowra, though there were spells shopkeeping unsuccessfully in Sydney. Bob was the last of five surviving children; his sister Myra became a Salvation Army officer and his brothers Bill and Ken schoolteachers. Their success – despite notoriety as a leading member of the Communist Party, Bill became a high school principal – helped Bob to pursue his own career.

His primary education began at a single-teacher bush school, and to get there he shared the back of a horse with Ken until his brother went to high school in Sydney. Bob undertook his secondary education at Wollongong, then Fort Street, and in 1939 completed an honours degree at Sydney University, where he shared the history medal with his academic and political antithesis, John Manning Ward. He undertook teacher training and taught in New South Wales schools until enlistment in the RAAF in 1942.

After wartime service Bob became a lecturer at the Sydney Teachers College, meanwhile completing a Masters thesis that would form the basis of his first book, *Radical and Working Class Politics* (1960), which traces the emergence of the Australian labour movement. He then won a scholarship to the London School of Economics where Harold Laski supervised his doctoral thesis.

Where next? One possibility was a career in the labour movement, for Bob had joined the Communist Party as an undergraduate and was prominent in the Teachers Federation; its president, Sam Lewis, wanted him to accept a full-time union post.

Bob's preference was further research. This would be difficult to combine with his duties at the Teachers College, and the new Australian National University was offering a research post. But that was untenured and paid less, a risky step to take since he had married the historian and communist Daphne Morris, and they now had two children, Klim and Kathy.

The early ANU made scant provision for wives, no matter how well qualified, while ASIO devoted considerable attention to vetting its academic appointments. To its credit, the university resisted pressure to block Bob's appointment and eventually found a place for Daphne to teach.

Bob flourished in the Research School of Social Sciences, especially after Keith Hancock returned from London to direct it. The two men differed in their politics but shared a common enjoyment of bushwalking and fishing; Hancock valued the

younger man as a historian of 'great integrity' and arranged for him to write a history of the Commonwealth Bank.

Apart from *Radical and Working Class Politics*, Bob also produced a history of *The Coalminers of New South Wales* (1963), the first research-based study of an Australian union and one that established a model for the genre. That led him to collect union records and with the economic historian Noel Butlin, who was gathering company records, he helped establish the archives at the ANU as the major national repository. With Eric Fry he also established the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History in 1961, and provided the contacts with its British and American counterparts. The Society's journal, *Labour History*, became the principal forum for a new kind of history, history from below, that enlivened the discipline.

He left the Communist Party following Khrushchev's admission of Stalin's atrocities and the Australian party's refusal to allow discussion of them. 'I joined the Communist Party in 1936,' he wrote, 'because it seemed to me the only party fully committed to a struggle for socialism and against fascism. I left it, with regret, in 1957, because that no longer seemed to be the case.' He maintained those principles and his political activism revived in the 1960s with the campaign against the Vietnam War and subsequently in the peace movement. With Keith Hancock he protested against the construction of Black Mountain Tower.

Bob's marriage to Daphne ended in the early 1960s and he found the Research School uncongenial after Hancock's retirement. He was rescued from the personal unhappiness by a new relationship with Anne Ayrton, whom he subsequently married, and resolved the professional dissatisfaction by taking up a teaching post. Unusually among the members of the Research School, he had volunteered for stints of lecturing, at Melbourne, Sydney, the University of Papua New Guinea and even the Soviet embassy. Now he applied for and was appointed to the chair of history in the Faculty of Arts.

He retired from the chair in 1981 and with Anne moved down to Armands Nook, near Bermagui, where with help from friends they built a house and formed new friends among the locals. They returned to Canberra at the end of the decade, travelled widely by campervan, and remained active in community life.

Intensely Australian in speech and manner, Bob Gollan was an instinctive internationalist. His first overseas trip was in 1941 to a left-wing conference in Mexico, rallying support for the war. The doctoral studies in London were followed by periods of overseas sabbatical leave, and wherever he travelled he engaged with the history and politics of his host country. He was always pressing new books onto friends and colleagues.

His mind was incisive and cut through cant. He was not impressed by academic preening, but his contributions at seminars and conferences were invariably telling. He was a gifted raconteur, who delighted in telling stories that deflated pomposity, and a lively drinking companion. His voice was seldom raised, though instances of bullying or humbug roused him. Above all, his patent decency and sincerity made him a bridge for scholars and activists seeking guidance and support; and through his own scholarship he created the bridge that allows us to understand his generation of activists.

Stuart Macintyre