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## PATRICK O'FARRELL

### The Reds and the Greens

The publication of *Vanished Kingdoms* by the University of New South Wales Press in 1990 did not attract the attention it deserved in New Zealand. Partly this reflects nothing more than the tendency of Australian publishers to neglect the New Zealand market. It is also a reflection of how quickly some twentieth-century experiences of New Zealand life have already become if not invisible then as faded as the snapshots of family photograph albums. Yet Patrick O'Farrell's personal excursion gives us a unique insight into a slice of West Coast history in the 30 or so years after the end of World War I. By chronicling his parents' journey from Borrisokane (Tipperary) to Puketahi Street in the heart of Greymouth's Catholic community, he opens up both the dynamics of the Irish diaspora and confronts again the peculiarities of the West Coast experience that had first troubled him some 30 years earlier. It is a story that unfolds around two events that were to reverberate through the twentieth century—the Russian Revolution and the Irish Rebellion. In the Grey Valley, the contradictory impulses of international Communism and assertive Catholicism were to give a sharper edge to the fragile alliance of the Reds and the Greens that had been stitched together by a community in which, as O'Farrell puts it, a 'worker ethos'<sup>1</sup> prevailed.

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1 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 140.



**Figure 2: Patrick O'Farrell in 1956 when completing his doctoral thesis at The Australian National University.**

Source: Courtesy O'Farrell family.

The roots of the unholy alliance, as its conservative and Protestant critics dubbed it, were to be found among the coalminers, waterside workers, railwaymen and labourers whose employment depended upon the coal trade. To O'Farrell, the miners were the 'closest and most complex of working communities'.<sup>2</sup> His mother found the West Coast variety of

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2 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 142.

the species almost frighteningly so. Set apart from the river port towns of Greymouth and Westport, the 'rough and temporary'<sup>3</sup> settlements at Runanga, Blackball, Denniston and Millerton seemed to newcomers like the O'Farrells to resemble a band of strange outsiders living precariously on a 'grimy coastal platform held hard against storm and sea'.<sup>4</sup> Compared with the ordered world they had left behind, the Coast seemed crude, primitive and newborn. It was a mix that had already produced a thrusting and assertive working-class community. Attitudes and traditions, first shaped at the coalface in the old world, expressed themselves in different forms in an environment where improvisation and creativity were needed. In this respect, the unions were agencies of colonialisation. Pragmatic and tough-minded in outlook, the colliers who built unionism anew on the Coast learned quickly that new circumstances required a new unionism. In this they had begun to wrestle with the very same problems that were to preoccupy O'Farrell as he began his exploration of how the Irish migrants of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australasia adjusted to their new environment. What of the old ways of doing things remained essential to their new circumstances?

At the heart of the colliers' experience of the new world was the need to re-establish in the mines the status they had been attempting to construct in the old. As workers whose lives were at risk every time they ventured underground, the miners had sought to develop a protective web of customs and practices that offered some sense of security at the coalface. Over time the appeal to custom might, in favourable circumstances, allow the men at the sharp end of the production process—the hewers—to assert greater control over the way coal was mined. They assumed the status of 'independent collier'<sup>5</sup>—free to manage their own workplaces in ways that allowed them to regulate the pace and pattern of their labour. The transfer of the traditions of the coalface from one mine to another, even within a single coalfield, was often a tortuous process; on the embryonic coalfields of settler societies like Australia and New Zealand, such traditions needed to be built anew. And, for both the coaltowns that developed on the Coast and the unions that stood at their heart, improvisation and tradition proved to be a potent mix. The communities that grew up around the mines that gave them life on the Grey Valley and

3 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 142.

4 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 140.

5 The term 'independent collier' is discussed in Royden Harrison, ed., *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered*, Sussex, The Harvester Press, 1978.

Buller coalfields, in the 50 or so years after the creation of the Denniston Miners' Union in 1884, were to play a role in the national history out of all proportion to their size and numerical strength and in ways that were variously condemned and celebrated by a wider community largely ignorant of the miners and their concerns.<sup>6</sup>

It was precisely the newcomer/outsider status of the miners within a society still in the throes of shrugging off the trappings of colonialism that interested O'Farrell. The vagaries of coal seams and the capitalist mode of production together made migrants of the miners. On New Zealand's West Coast they confronted a double separation: they were cut adrift from both the familiar union structure of home and from the embryonic colonial labour movement. In combination, these twin prongs of isolation fanned the ingrained sense of protest that was deeply embedded in mining culture and a powerful ingredient in the ideology of the aspiring independent collier. These were forces that produced a closed and intense enclave of workers preoccupied with the grievances of particular pits yet at times able to launch a wider assault on the coal owners and the capitalist system more generally. Did the peculiarities of the West Coast environment make easier the transition from the narrower concerns of time and place to the more inclusive considerations of occupation and class that might lay the basis of a regional or national labour movement? Or, as O'Farrell asked of May's goldminers in his 1969 review of *The West Coast Gold Rushes* (second edition): did the 'cheerless rotting damp'<sup>7</sup> defeat colliers and coal owners alike?

The first chapter in this contest between migrant miners and colonial environment had its genesis in the attempt to exploit the rich coal deposits of the Buller coalfield. Even by West Coast standards, the coal seams of what was to become Denniston required ingenuity and persistence before they would yield their rich resources. No amount of colonial improvisation was going to overcome the need for experienced labour. And thus it was that the British colliers recruited for the task came as a community apart, newcomers marked out by occupation and an accent that was even then uniformly discordant. It was the miners' collective presence as unionists that was to mark them out as a people apart. Their efforts to consolidate unionism on West Coast coalfields in

6 See Len Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community: The United Mineworkers of New Zealand, 1880-1960*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1995.

7 O'Farrell, 'Review: P.R. May, *The West Coast Gold Rushes*', p. 90.

the 1880s came at a time when the colonial economy was contracting, labour/capital relations were hardening and sensitivity to any disruption of shipping was increasing. The initial skirmishes between the miners and coal owners injected the language of class war into an environment where the rhetoric of boosterism and pioneering prevailed. By common consent, the difficulties of the West Coast frontier were obstacle enough without the added complication of colliers whose workplace practices were a mix of ideology, customs and traditions fashioned in the old world. The coal masters of the new world, bent upon establishing an infant industry in circumstances where the odds seemed stacked against them, sought to prevent these attitudes from taking root in their pits. It was this struggle for influence at the point of production that lay behind the first round of labour disputes on the West Coast coalfields.

O'Farrell was less interested in the push and shove of industrial relations than in the world views that underlay them. And the miners who established unionism in the West Coast pits in the 1880s brought with them not only the pragmatism of the pits, grounded as it was in custom and tradition, but also some of the notions that collectively have been labelled by historians as utopian socialism. They were to prove a heady mixture. The belief that society could be transformed by cooperation and rationality without the need for conflict lay at the heart of these beliefs. It was embedded in the cooperative nature of mining and informed the entrenched sense of their own history rooted, as it was, in the grievances of the pit. The miners who assembled at Denniston and Brunner carried with them, from the specific mines they had experienced, historical memories encased, as it were, in a litany of injustices generic to that which bound miners together as a people apart. It was a powerful ingredient and one that at times was capable of converting the pragmatism of the workplace into the realms of wider social protest.

Grievance and protest were the stuff of which the early history of mining unionism on the Grey and Buller coalfields was made. The initial years witnessed a struggle for acceptance as the new arrivals sought to establish the collective right to organise so as to protect long-established work practices. A rash of industrial skirmishes followed as the mine owners sought to limit the influence of old-world unionism in their pits. In these disputes, as O'Farrell notes, the unionists faced difficulties, overcoming the 'individualistic disposition' and restless capitalist impulses of the goldminers whose 'usually hopeful poverty was at such an ebb' that

they 'appeared from their lonely gullies'<sup>8</sup> to become strikebreakers. The introduction of new workers with little if any experience underground compromised, in the view of the miners, the safety of the men in the pits. Attempts by unionists to vet all newcomers were rebuffed by the coal owners as intruding upon the prerogatives of management. Unwilling at first to test the miners' resolve, the initial efforts to bring in unskilled labour were abandoned by owners who recognised that in colonial circumstances skilled British colliers were indispensable.

The primitiveness of the West Coast environment provided a setting in which the combined forces of tough-minded pragmatism and utopian idealism might fuse. Methodism was an important conduit between these apparently mutually limiting attitudes of mind. John Lomas, a Methodist lay preacher from Barnsley in southern Yorkshire, became the defining voice of the West Coast mining unionism. From his unlikely Denniston base, he launched New Zealand's first attempt at a national mining organisation. To Lomas, the miners' demands were as rational and just as their rejection by the coal owners was unconscionable and perverse. The union's function, as he saw it, was to give wider expression to the cooperative impulses made necessary by the dangers of mining. Such cooperation might, he believed, be the basis for a wider organisation of labour that might prevail upon employers to see the future in less antagonistic terms. It was a conclusion hastened by the consolidation that was taking place among employers.

In 1888 the Union Steam Ship Company assumed monopoly control of the Grey Valley and the Buller coalfields. To avoid being played off against each other, it now became imperative for the miners to meet combination with combination. To achieve this end the colliers needed to construct novel forms of mining unionism as they knew it. For mining unionism to be effective in the West Coast environment it was essential not only to assert an influence in the pits but also to educate and organise the district's labour force that lacked a tradition of unionism. And the all-embracing tentacles of the 'southern octopus' that was the Union Steam Ship Company drove West Coast miners to seek combination with their Australian counterparts. In 1888 Lomas made his way to Creswick, Victoria, and aligned the West Coast miners with the Amalgamated

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8 Patrick O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths, Bitter Local Reality: 1890 in New Zealand's Grey District', in Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells, eds, *The Maritime Strike: A Centennial Retrospective, Essays in Honour of E.C. Fry*, Wollongong, Five Islands Press, 1992, p. 32.

Miners' and Labourers' Association of Australasia. Over the next two years he became a veritable 'apostle of unionism', preaching the gospel of unionism throughout the colony's coalfields. As such, he became the face and voice of the miners as colonists began to recognise that they had what contemporaries called a 'labour problem'.

At one level, Lomas presented a conciliatory presence in the events that led to the colony's first labour/capital crisis, the Maritime Strike of 1890. Yet there was a steely resolve in his consistent rejection of a market economy that was determined by the untrammelled fluctuations of the law of supply and demand. It was a resolve that was to bring opprobrium upon the miners; what could working men know about how the economy functioned? Newspaper commentators were quick to paint the miners as putting their own petty and parochial concerns ahead of the interests of the colony.<sup>9</sup>

The confrontation that was the Maritime Strike came too soon for the embryonic labour movement. Confronted by a determined phalanx of employers and a government prepared to stand and watch, defeat was inevitable. The utopian socialist impulse that lay behind the miners' first foray into colonial and intercolonial prominence withered in the 1890s. In addressing the issue of what the men of the Grey Valley thought and believed at the time of the Maritime Strike, O'Farrell is characteristically blunt: they 'thought little, believed dreams' and possessed a 'naïve and passive confidence in the omnipotence of combination'.<sup>10</sup> When pushed to explain their actions, the men of the Grey described their actions as 'fighting for a principle' and believed there was something in the very struggle 'that lifts up'. Reflecting upon this, in 1990, O'Farrell thought the justifications seemed 'lame, absurd' but added that in 'a Utopian age, men must have dreams'. The cost of the 'warm glow of (false) commonality and the illusion of shared strength'<sup>11</sup> was, he considered, immense. By the late 1890s:

Brunner was dead—breathing, but yet an economic and psychological corpse ... and its role in the 1890 Strike reads like bad melodrama, desperately sad, ruled by dark and largely impersonal forces, with the human actors shadowy and

9 Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 41–51.

10 O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths', p. 34.

11 O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths', p. 34.

uncomprehending, caught in the grip of their fates. It is a grim play, now badly dated, hard to believe, of no inspiration save for endurance, a performance which will never be staged again.<sup>12</sup>

The pressing problem was to preserve the traditions of the pit in the face of employers determined to deny unionism a presence. This had long been the everyday preoccupation of the miners, and at the coalface this concern was always going to provide the basis for union regeneration in each particular mine. The process was smoothed by legislative and political changes at least in part products of the wave of union activity that had seen the miners emerge as a significant industrial organisation. The Maritime Strike played a significant role in the reconfiguration of colonial politics and the building of what came to be known as the 'Lib-Lab' alliance. It was a realignment that had immediate consequences for West Coast miners. The introduction of the *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1894* (ICA Act) allowed the miners to regain the recognition in the pits they had all but lost in the aftermath of the Maritime Strike. The Denniston miners were the first workers in the colony to register under the new legislation that compelled employers to negotiate with the union and provided a process whereby disputes might be resolved by an independent umpire. Surrendering the final word to an arbitrator sat uneasily alongside the desire of the hewers to control work at the coalface. For the moment, however, acceptance of the ICA Act offered a safeguard when the exercise of their industrial muscle at the point of production proved inadequate. It was a compromise grounded in the pragmatism of men unwilling to defer to others on matters that determined the safety of life in the pits.

Revisiting these events 100 years on, and from the perspective of the Grey Valley, O'Farrell offers a grim picture of West Coast realities:

[T]he workforce was fluctuating and migratory to a degree destructive of all organisation, it was naïve and ill-informed to a degree innocent of and antipathetic towards all ideology, it was bereft of leadership or strong personalities, it was internally competitive and company-ruled to a degree undermining all solidarity, and it was the constant victim of a wider and depressed inter-colonial economy whose vagaries, together with local weather factors, ruled both employers and employees. In this environment, the 1890 Strike was ... another destructive incident

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12 O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths', p. 35.

in the individual worker's experience of a continuum of intense depression and uncontrolled economic anarchy. Each element in this repressive structure had to be seriously weakened, if not shattered, by new men and new ideas, and, not least, by time and economic improvement, before labouring men began to be released from the prison of the 1890s.<sup>13</sup>

So restricted were the employment prospects of the Grey Valley that down on their luck goldminers had no option but to seek work on the roads, wharves and railways where they constituted an unstable and unpredictable element of a coal-oriented workforce or, as O'Farrell puts it, 'inveterate wanderers, with fluid and basically capitalist social ideals, and no commitment to geographic place'.<sup>14</sup>

The destabilising influence of the diggers was to fade as the exploitation of coal grew in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Even then, as O'Farrell writes, the fluctuation of the trade cycle on the Buller and Grey Valley coalfields 'was never boom but often bust'.<sup>15</sup> In union building, however, the opening decade of the new century witnessed a shift in the centre of gravity from the Buller to the Grey Valley. Blackball and Runanga miners became the driving force as a new generation of miners brought new ideas and new forms of organisation to the coalfields. It was a conjunction of time and place that was, in O'Farrell's view, to 'change the history of New Zealand'.<sup>16</sup> The newcomers were a more diverse lot than the British colliers who crafted unionism at Denniston in the 1890s. The new settlement that sprang up at Runanga, for example, reflects the new order. There was a sprinkling of families from nearby Brunner, the Grey Valley's oldest coaltown, hoping to shake free of the shadow of tragedy that hung over a community devastated by a tragic pit explosion in 1895, which left 65 miners dead. Others came from smaller South Island pits in the hope of finding more regular work. Still others—probably the majority—came from British coalfields in response to the urgings of friends or family.

What distinguished the second wave of migrant miners from that of the 1880s, however, was its 'new world' leavening. The arrival of men from across the Tasman—principally from Victoria—led commentators to describe it as an 'Australian invasion'. Whatever Runanga's precise

13 O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths', pp. 31–32.

14 O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths', pp. 31–32.

15 O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths', pp. 31–32.

16 O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths', p. 35.

character, it was, like the new mining towns on the Buller coalfield at Millerton, Stockton and Granity, rough and temporary in nature. To newcomers in the Grey Valley, like O'Farrell's parents who established themselves in Greymouth in the 1920s—a decade after Runanga and Blackball had become synonymous with Red Fedism—they appeared to have been put together with a frontier-like randomness. They were the antithesis of an 'ordered society', a 'jumble of unknown individualists bouncing off each other in random unpredictable ways'.<sup>17</sup>

Disordered, complex and chaotic in composition as it was, this Grey Valley briefly thrust itself into colonial consciousness in ways that were to have dramatic consequences nationally. The workplace grievances that formed the basis of the new radicalism emanating from the Grey Valley were both historic and particular to time and place. Historic in the sense that they derived from the traditional hewers' concern to exert as much control over the pace and pattern of life at the coalface as they could. The particularities added by the Grey coalfield mirrored those that had provided the context for the first wave of mining unions on the Buller field. Runanga and Dunollie, Blackball and Roa were as primitive in their provision for miners and their families as Denniston and Coalbrookdale, if not as spectacularly remote. What distinguished the southern coalfield was its different pattern of ownership. Its most striking feature was the involvement of the state. To Lomas and the mining leaders of the 1880s, coal was a national resource best exploited as a public enterprise. The monopoly of the West Coast coal supplies that the shipowners possessed in the 1880s and 1890s reinforced the miners' preference for a nationalised coal industry. The decision of the Seddon Government in 1901 to involve the state directly in the mining of coal, in competition with private coal owners, was welcomed by miners who calculated that a state colliery presented an opportunity for the men at the end of the pick to establish a greater level of control in their own workplaces. More than this, the venture might conceivably set new standards in working conditions that could become the benchmark for all other pits in the colony. Whatever the calculation, as O'Farrell noted, Runanga quickly 'took the lead in workers' affairs'.<sup>18</sup>

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17 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 144.

18 P.J. O'Farrell, 'Politics in Westland', in Rupert A. Kay, ed., *Westland's Golden Century 1860–1960: An Official Souvenir of Westland's Centenary*, Christchurch, Westland Centennial Council, 1959, p. 45.

The state mine at Runanga, 8 kilometres from Greymouth, offered men with programs an opportunity for putting them into practice. Socialists of various hues arrived determined to put the new tenets of industrial unionism to the test; among them, youthful men from Australia as different in temperament as Robert ('Bob the Ranter') Semple, Patrick (Paddy) Webb and Pat Hickey, a New Zealand-born radical, recently returned from the United States where he had been in touch with the syndicalist-inspired Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies). The apostles of socialism carried their message about the West Coast coalfields with a proselytising zeal that was to strike a chord among the hastily thrown together community that developed in Runanga and adjacent Dunollie, and beyond to the nearby mining township that was taking shape at Blackball. O'Farrell was the first historian to explore in depth the story of how this socialist vanguard took their message beyond the coalfields and thrust themselves to the forefront of the New Zealand labour movement.

Here in microcosm, so it seemed, was the classic Marxist technique with "the most advanced and resolute section" of the working class asserting its historic role. The avowed object was the formation of the 'proletariat' into a 'class', the overthrow of 'bourgeois' supremacy, and the acquisition of political power by the proletariat. The language was that of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848: the setting was the draughty tin-roofed halls of Greymouth and Runanga, the sunless Brunner streets and the dusty confines of a Blackball coalface.<sup>19</sup>

It was this collision between rhetoric and the bitter reality that attracted and retained O'Farrell's attention for nearly half a century. There was drama in the jostle of ideas and personalities. Semple emerges as the most colourful of activists:

His spare build gave the impression of tallness. High prominent cheek-bones and a drooping moustache accentuated sunken cheeks. He held himself erect, shoulders a little back, the stance of a boxer ... he was to stand out in the Grey district as industrial radicalism personified, the core of worker protest and action, the giver and receiver of vitriolic abuse ... he was 'Bob the Ranter', 'the demon of dissension'.<sup>20</sup>

19 P.J. O'Farrell, 'Politics and Coal: The Socialist Vanguard', in Philip Ross May, ed., *Miners and Militants: Politics in Westland 1865–1918*, Christchurch, Whitcoulls for the University of Canterbury, 1975, p. 102.

20 O'Farrell, 'Politics and Coal', pp. 103–4.

Hickey had imbibed at 'the bitter springs which nourished the extremism in the American Labour movement', and these 'harsh American years', especially his experiences as a member of the Western Federation of Miners, the 'toughest, most hard bitten of American unions', were 'written on his face': 'the thrusting aggressive chin, the sour down-turned mouth, the challenging eyes'.<sup>21</sup> The 'already partially bald' Paddy Webb, who like Semple had crossed the Tasman from Victoria, possessed 'a look of maturity much in advance of his twenty three years'.<sup>22</sup>

The story of how this socialist vanguard refashioned the Grey Valley labour movement and created arguably the nation's most radical industrial organisation, the Red Federation of Labour, has become deeply imbedded in left-wing mythology. O'Farrell's pioneering exploration of the burst of activity that reverberated well beyond the coalfields was concerned primarily with its political manifestations. Writing well before the attention of labour historians began to turn more closely to the workplace dimension of worker radicalism, O'Farrell's preoccupation was essentially with the political ideas that propelled action. His explanations of the relationship between place, politics and pit recognise both the cohesiveness of mining communities in general and the newness and rawness of the Grey district. The latter provided radicals with a fresh stage upon which to perform, a platform less encumbered by existing hierarchies. In short, Runanga, Blackball and their camp-like offshoot settlements full of youthful miners ready for a scrap were receptive to the muscular socialism of the emergent Red Fed radicals. Nonetheless, for all the speed with which the radicals thrust themselves to the forefront of coalfields unionism, their emergence took much of its vitality from the ongoing tradition of pit socialism—the desire of the hewers to eke out as much freedom as they could at the end of the pick.

The convergence of this traditional attempt by the most skilled segment of the underground workforce to maximise their independence in the pits and the more overtly political and revolutionary objectives of the radicals produced, as O'Farrell recognised, a radical fragment of immense energy and intensity. Its initial achievements were local ones. There were improvements in the hewing rate at Runanga. At Blackball in 1908, however, the socialists successfully engineered a local strike that won them a 30-minute crib time (tucker time). The success of the strike catapulted

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21 O'Farrell, 'Politics and Coal', p. 108.

22 O'Farrell, 'Politics and Coal', p. 110.

the socialist leadership onto the national stage and, as we shall see later, established Blackball's claim to a pre-eminent place in the history of the New Zealand labour movement. The critical significance of the strike for the socialist leadership, however, lies in the damage that the strike did to the central pillar of industrial relations, the arbitration system. The notion of compromise and the adjudication of a notionally impartial umpire implicit in the ICA Act of 1894 sat uneasily with most miners. Accepting the judgement of a court-appointed arbitration system was, in their view, placing too much reliance upon a system that lacked real knowledge of the issues it was being asked to decide. No arbitration system and no arbitrator appointed by the state could be truly impartial. Discrediting the system required them to demonstrate firstly to the miners that it was possible to achieve more by direct action—striking—than could be negotiated within the arbitration system.

The victory at Blackball emboldened the radical leadership to pursue more vigorously their plans for a wider assault upon the capitalist system. Here the doctrines of syndicalism were to prevail. Its central objective was creating one big industrial union that drew together the entire labour movement so that the workers' most powerful weapon—the general strike—might be more easily mounted. After the events of Blackball, the question for the more ideologically driven miners was not whether there should be a crack at the capitalist system but when and where it should happen. The initiatives of the Grey Valley miners led directly to the establishment of the Red Federation of Labour and a campaign designed to persuade the colony's trade unionists to cancel their registration with the arbitration system and endorse the direct action philosophy of the syndicalists. Such a campaign took the activists away from the coalfields and, as O'Farrell made clear, ran the risk of distancing the radicals from the pit socialists—those miners left with the realities of life in the coaltowns. What eased the tension between the wider interests of the ideologues and the particular concerns of the men in the pits was, as O'Farrell saw it, a combination of the traditional and hardbitten quest for independence at the coalface and an urgency lent by the rawness of a coalfield 'situated at world's end'.

Flushed by the dramatic events at Blackball, the formation of the Red Federation of Labour and the successes their threatening presence produced in disputes around the colony, the radicals were irritated when there was no headlong rush on West Coast coalfields or anywhere else to proclaim a general strike. Runanga and Blackball in the Grey Valley

continued to adopt a more radical stance; at Brunner and in the older Buller communities, the memories of the defeat in 1890 induced a greater caution. In some pits there was a belief that as useful as the threatening posture of the radicals was, throwing away such protection as the arbitration system offered was foolhardy. This pragmatic wariness was strongest among the hewers and those closest to the perils of work at the coalface where any change was weighed carefully. It was nonetheless clear that after the exhilaration of the Blackball dispute the Grey Valley coalfields were, as one commentator put it, 'jumpy'. The heightened expectations aroused by the initial euphoria of the Red Fed victories, the energy and enthusiasm of the socialist vanguard and an environment that nurtured grievance and generated protest was a powerful combination.

To impatient radicals the hiatus was frustrating. A loss of momentum allowed employers time to regroup politically and industrially. It also bred uncertainties. The five years between Blackball and the eventual proclamation of a general strike in 1913 were played out elsewhere. The proselytising zeal and belligerence of the peripatetic Red Fed organisers, as they sought to swell the ranks of militant labour, produced alarm in boardrooms throughout the colony and hastened the unravelling of the political alliance born in the aftermath of the Maritime Strike. The new alignments produced by this disintegration were to take on a special significance in the Grey Valley. O'Farrell saw the Grey Valley as providing an environment in which it was possible for these political shifts to occur in advance of, and more dramatically than, anywhere else in the colony. Politically, the Grey Valley was Liberal Party territory. In large part this attachment reflected support for the premier, Richard John Seddon, the rambunctious publican from the goldmining town of Kumara who had become synonymous with the mixture of state activity, modest social reform and colonial boosterism that characterised the Liberal Party.<sup>23</sup> The opening of the state coalmine at Runanga in 1902 was seen as strengthening the bond between the miners and the government. But Seddon's death in 1906 loosened this link and strengthened the hands of the socialists already beginning to direct their attention to attacking the arbitration system, the central pillar of the Liberal's industrial relations

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23 On Seddon, see Janice Lockwood, 'Personality and Politics: Seddon and His Electorates, 1879–90', in Philip Ross May, ed., *Miners and Militants: Politics in Westland 1865–1918*, Christchurch, Whitcoulls for the University of Canterbury, 1975, pp. 48–79. On Seddon and the Liberal Party, see Tom Brooking, *Richard Seddon: King of God's Own. The Life and Times of New Zealand's Longest-Serving Prime Minister*, Auckland, Penguin, 2014.

and the cornerstone of its political alliance with organised labour. Calls for an independent labour political organisation that had surfaced on the coalfields before Seddon's death now gathered momentum.

It was several decades before the ghost of Seddon ceased to hover over the political scene. His son T.E.Y. Seddon defeated the mayor of Hokitika to follow him as the Member of the House of Representatives (MHR) for the adjoining seat of Westland. Within a year of the premier's death the first shot had been fired and the construction of the Otira tunnel had begun; the great dream of a rail link with the east was finally underway. Local Liberals continued to incorporate other visible additions to the Greymouth townscape into a permanent Seddonian legacy. A new post office at the corner of Tainui and Guinness streets, completed in 1908 and hailed by the *Grey River Argus* as an example of 'English Renaissance architecture', soon took on 'its own symbolic significance' and was 'read as a memorial to Seddon's political achievements'.<sup>24</sup> A courthouse completed nearby in 1912, less imposing in its public face, further greened the memory. Not to be left out of the commemorative urge and more than a little perturbed at Greymouth's expansion, Hokitika-interests successfully thwarted moves to transfer more government offices to the northern coaltown. And, in front of the new offices, they erected a memorial statue to a premier they believed, justifiably, belonged more to them than their Greymouth counterparts.

The eclipse of political Liberalism on the Coast coincided with the rise of Greymouth and a corresponding decline in the fortunes of Hokitika. As the Liberal MHR for Westland, Tommy Seddon was to witness the shift and to suffer the political consequences of an electoral redistribution that added Greymouth to his electorate. In his autobiographical *The Seddons* (1968), he recaptures contemporary thinking on the shifting fortunes of the two towns:

Edinburgh feels itself superior to Glasgow, and Hokitika and Greymouth are critical of each other's progress. Hokitika remembers its romantic past when the port of Hokitika rivalled the ports of Wellington and Auckland in importance. Hokitika remembered the agitation to free Westland from the fetters of Canterbury—Hokitika remembered that there sat the Provincial Council. A superintendent lived in Government House. Hokitika was

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24 Peter Richardson, 'An Architecture of Empire: The Government Buildings of John Campbell in New Zealand', MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 1988, p. 163.

proud to call itself the Capital of Westland. Greymouth's interests were once tied up with the interests of Nelson. To Hokitika, to goldfields nearby, swarmed the goldseekers from the ends of the earth. When the gold petered out, coal in the hinterland from Greymouth became a very valuable asset. Greymouth's port was improved by guiding walls of stone, Hokitika's port filled with the debris from sluicing claims. Greymouth was advancing with greater speed than the southern town, Hokitika.<sup>25</sup>

The dynamic behind the shift was unmistakably linked to coal. The miners accordingly bulked large in the local labour movement and their organisation was such that they possessed the numerical strength to shape labour's entry into the political arena. But theirs was neither the only voice nor, as O'Farrell reminds us, always the most significant one locally. Organised Catholicism was beginning to make its presence felt alongside the miners, watersiders and sawmillers—the manual workers who encapsulated the physicality of work in the Grey Valley. In Greymouth, as we have seen, the dominantly Catholic community had already staked out its segment of the town and politically attached itself to the rising star of Liberalism. If Seddon was its West Coast face, its local Liberal Catholic standard bearer was Martin Kennedy (1839/40–1916). Part of the first wave of Irish migration to the West Coast, he became one of the most influential layman in the New Zealand Irish Catholic community of his day.<sup>26</sup> His pathway to Greymouth had been a familiar one: the goldfields of Victoria, then a storekeeper on the Otago fields before moving to the Coast in 1868. As a merchant and businessman, he made his mark quickly; in 1870 he founded the Greymouth Gas Company. Within a decade he had earned the sobriquet 'West Coast coal magnate', as sole proprietor of the Brunner Coal Mine and owner of a fleet of colliers. In the process, he had dabbled briefly in politics—unsuccessfully contesting the superintendency of the newly created Westland in 1874; he won the Grey Valley seat in the 1876 election but retired to concentrate on business two years later. By the beginning of the Liberal reign in 1890 he had sold his coal interest to the Union Steam Ship Company and moved to Wellington. His departure, as both Greymouth's Liberal-aligned newspapers (the *Greymouth Evening Star* and the *Grey River Argus*) sensed, raised the possibility that the 'Liberalism of the Grey' might be

25 Seddon, *The Seddons*, p. 185.

26 Hugh Laracy, 'Kennedy, Martin', in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1996, updated 7 April 2006, *Tē Ara—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, [teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3k9/kennedy-martin](http://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3k9/kennedy-martin).

undermined by an unholy alliance of the Reds and the Greens. It was a connection that came easily to the pen of editorialists. Irish Catholics loomed large among the railwaymen, sawmill workers, watersiders and general labourers, and were thus seen as providing a home for Red Fedism in the town. Whatever the reality, this perception was strengthened by the politics that surrounded the rise of radical unionism.

The death in 1913 of Sir Arthur Guinness, the Liberal member for Grey since 1884, provided a testing ground for the shifting politics of the day. A barrister and solicitor, Guinness had set up practice in Greymouth in 1867. As a loyal acolyte of the colourful Seddon, he had been rewarded for his loyalty by appointment as Chairman of Committees (1893–1903) and Speaker (1903–13). An uneasy representative of the alliance between organised labour and the Liberal Party, he had struggled to contain the growing demands for an independent labour voice in the electorate. In the 1911 general election the miners had campaigned unsuccessfully, under the banner of the Grey District Industrial and Political Council, to unseat Guinness. Their candidate was Paddy Webb, now President of the State Miners' Union at Runanga. Guinness survived the socialist foray into politics (by 3,667 votes to the 2,539 of his nearest opponent) but it was clear that Labour had arrived as a political force in the Grey. The by-election in 1913 to find a replacement for Guinness thus marks in local terms the passing of the old regime and the construction of a new set of political loyalties more aligned to the community that Greymouth had become in the near 30 years Guinness had been the district's parliamentary voice.

The political scramble for the Grey that followed reflected the consolidation of the district's major social groups. Webb was once more the choice of organised labour. The Liberals chose Michael Hannan, a Greymouth lawyer and Catholic; the newly created party of colonial conservatism, Reform, nominated an initially reluctant Hokitika businessman, sometime mayor and prominent Mason, Henry Michel. Thus, the three-way contest straddled the fault lines of the community. No candidate gained a clear majority. The *Second Ballot Act 1908* required that the bottom polling candidate drop out and electors asked to choose between the two highest-polling candidates. It was the Liberal and Catholic Hannan who was squeezed out by the rival and increasingly polarised forces of industrial labour and the alliance of urban and rural property that made up the Reform Party. Disappointed Liberals were now forced to choose between Webb, the voice, so conservatives would have it, of revolutionary labour bent upon

destroying the fabric of capitalist society as they knew it, and a party of property with historical roots in the thinking of the neoclassical economists of the nineteenth century. The electors of the Grey district would have probably seen the choice in more parochial and pragmatic terms: that between a coalminer from Runanga—a ‘Paddy’ by name and ancestry if not by inclination—a product of the Grey as it now was and an outsider from Hokitika of establishment and plainly Protestant hue.

The campaign was marked by scare tactics and sectarianism. Reform interests painted Labour as the ‘Red Terror’ and threatened that the Massey Government would close the state mine at Runanga and cease construction of the Otira tunnel if the electors returned Webb. Employers declared their support for Michel and hinted that workers who voted for Webb could face dismissal. An anonymous report circulated in Greymouth suggested Webb’s supporters would descend from the mining centres and wreak havoc upon the town’s business premises should the Reds be rejected at the polls. ‘Is the Grey electorate to be placed in the grip of the monster?’ was the question put to a meeting in the Greymouth Town Hall on the eve of the poll as Reform campaigners strove to frighten waiverers and drive a wedge between Webb and Catholic Liberal voters thought to be transferring their vote to Labour. It was a strategy that produced vitriolic outbursts, unruly behaviour and a few ruffled feathers. It also flew in the face of changing social and political realities.

With the demise of Seddon and his protégé Guinness, loyalty to the political regime that had delivered state coalmines and, if more slowly, railways was diminishing as impatient newcomers added their voices to those who had already sunk roots in the district. The Catholic vote alone, if it could be assembled, would not have given Webb victory. But many Liberals would have clung to the hope that the socialist Webb was a preferable heir to the old liberalism that they traced back to Sir George Grey in the 1870s than the conservatism of the propertied classes represented by the Reform Party. However much defeated conservatives might bemoan the unholy alliance of the Red Feds and the Greens, the political verdict of the Grey electorate in 1913 was an endorsement of a town on the cusp of embracing a future in which coal and Catholicism would play an even more significant part. And, in this sense, the district’s verdict was, as Webb’s supporters claimed, a victory of democracy.<sup>27</sup>

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27 See O’Farrell, ‘Politics and Coal’, pp. 101–27; Len Richardson, ‘Politics and War: Coal Miners and Conscripted’, in Philip Ross May, ed., *Miners and Militants: Politics in Westland 1865–1918*, Christchurch, Whitcoulls for the University of Canterbury, 1975, pp. 128–55.

O'Farrell's first foray into the history of the Grey Valley effectively ended as the curtain was drawn on the old liberal period with its foundations anchored in the nineteenth-century gold rush and its aftermath. But his involvement with the history of the Grey district moved almost seamlessly on as he took up a research scholarship at The Australian National University in Canberra and began work on a life of Harry Holland. A militant socialist born in 1868 at Ginninderra, near modern-day Canberra, Holland had crossed the Tasman at the urging of the Red Federation of Labour in 1912 anxious to use his talents as a propagandist during the Waihi Strike, widely seen by local socialists as a precursor to a general strike. His revolutionary reputation preceded him. His role in the 1909 Broken Hill metal miners' strike earned a conviction for sedition and he served five months of a two-year jail sentence. He left Australia under threat of further imprisonment after failing to register his son for compulsory military training and refusing to pay the fines imposed. In New Zealand he quickly added to his image as a troublemaker. With 'Ballot Box' and R.S. Ross he had written *The Tragic Story of the Waihi Strike* (1913), a work that was to become a landmark in the history of the New Zealand labour movement.<sup>28</sup> During the 1913 General Strike, he was convicted of seditious utterance, sentenced to 15 months and spent two and a half months in prison.

If the defeat of the General Strike revealed to Holland the limits of industrial unrest as the harbinger of capitalism's collapse, the election of Paddy Webb as the Social Democratic Party member for Grey in 1913 opened up the prospect of building a genuine socialist labour party, as it were, from the ground up. The outbreak of world war in August 1914, in Holland's view, signified the imminent collapse of capitalism and made it more urgent that labour should be organised politically and industrially so as to take power when the end finally came. The introduction of conscription in 1915 strengthened his conviction that the war was a capitalist one and made political consolidation of labour's ranks even more critical. In July 1916 he threw his support behind the formation of the New Zealand Labour Party (NZLP) and stepped up his campaign against conscription.

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28 H.E. Holland, R.S. Ross and 'Ballot Box' (Francis O'Flynn), *The Tragic Story of the Waihi Strike*, Wellington, The Worker Printery, 1913.

The Grey Valley became a hotbed of opposition to conscription. The reorganisation of mining unionism after the calamitous General Strike of 1913 brought a harder edge to union affairs as miners sought to shore up their influence in the pit. The war and the dislocation of the coal trade that it brought with it strengthened their negotiating hand industrially. In these circumstances, opposition to military training grew into a campaign against the conscription of manpower for military purposes and was seen as a precursor of industrial conscription. Catholics in the Grey, as elsewhere, were drawn into the issue by the treatment of the religious orders in the ballots for military service introduced in the *Military Service Act 1916*. The legislation allowed no blanket exemptions and as a consequence individual seminarians were called before the various appeal boards to make their case. Many Catholics saw this procedure as yet another example of Protestant insensitivity. The repression of the Irish Rebellion in 1916 stirred Irish nationalist sympathies and, in Grey Valley terms, drew Reds and Greens to a shared platform of dissent. The miners' anti-conscription campaign spearheaded from Runanga and Blackball during 1916–17, the rejection of conscription in Australia in two plebiscites and the role played by the vociferous and belligerent Melbourne Archbishop Daniel Mannix in this campaign provided the backdrop against which the West Coast thrust itself once more onto the national stage.

O'Farrell was drawn to the political dimension of this transformation. In the 1914 general election, Paddy Webb had held the Grey seat for the Social Democratic Party despite a 'khaki campaign' that saw conservatives question the loyalty of a party that had links to Berlin. He was called up for military service in 1917. He resigned his seat forcing a by-election which he fought on the issue of conscription, intending to argue that if elected his rejection of conscription had received a mandate from the electorate. The wartime coalition government undermined the strategy by refusing to run a candidate in the by-election. Webb then refused the non-combatant role offered him, was court-martialled, sentenced to two years hard labour and deprived of his civil rights for 10 years. The Labour Party chose another Australian, Harry Holland, as its candidate in the by-election that ensued in 1918. If Webb was the genial face of socialism, Holland was its unsmiling and revolutionary one. Holland's credentials were impeccable for a campaign that was to test the embryonic alliance between the Reds and the Greens. Holland had played an important role in fostering what amounted to an alliance between the NZLP and

Catholicism. In 1916 he had written a series of articles on the historical foundations of the Irish Easter Rebellion. A year later he toured the country delivering a series of lectures on Irish topics. His championing of the Irish cause rested upon a 'distaste for imperialism and oppression of minorities' and shunned violence. His selection to contest the Grey seat provided radical Protestantism with a target.

Six months earlier, in July 1917, Protestantism had launched an offensive against 'Romanism' and formed the Protestant Political Association (PPA) to fight Catholicism in New Zealand. Irish nationalists used the pages of the *Green Ray*, the organ of the Maoriland Irish Society, to announce their support for Labour: 'We sincerely hope that every man and woman of Irish blood, irrespective of class or creed, shall unite in returning the labour candidate for the Grey [and] give the militarist, capitalist and shoneen cliques a smashing defeat'. After a vitriolic campaign, Holland shed most of Webb's near 1,000 majority to sneak home by 148 votes. That almost one-third of potential voters abstained made the result a difficult one to read. Did Holland alienate sections of the moderate Labour vote? Did the urging of the PPA frighten off Protestant voters who might otherwise have voted Labour? O'Farrell was in no doubt that Irish voters did support Holland. He notes with satisfaction the celebration of a Mrs O'Donnell of Runanga: 'The way the Irish rallied round our Labour candidate was grand. We certainly are "children of a fighting race" especially when the fight is for liberty and freedom as was Mr Holland's policy'.<sup>29</sup>

In a number of ways the more important consequence of the 1918 by-election was that it consolidated such linkages as were being drawn between Irish nationalists and the Labour Party. Firstly, the election witnessed the purchase of the *Grey River Argus* by the local labour movement. During Holland's campaign, the party had purchased column space in the paper. Traditionally seen as the miners' paper, the *Argus* was much more than this. Its pages reflected the perspectives of its hybrid nature. For the miners, politics was something of an optional extra—important when all other avenues of achieving their objectives seemed closed off. Except to the activist few, its committees and bureaucratic procedures were at odds with the general impatience of the many. The heart of the political Labour machine was in Greymouth and thickly represented among its custodians were working-class Irish Catholics. As a group their political

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29 O'Farrell, *Harry Holland*, p. 93, citing the Maoriland Irish Society's *Green Ray*, 1 June 1918.

flavour was, as O'Farrell has described, right wing. And the 1918 electoral redistribution consolidated their influence. Greymouth became part of the Westland electorate; the mining towns of Runanga and Blackball, north of the Grey River, part of the Buller electorate. In all other respects the mining towns were tied to Greymouth, but the loosening of direct political representation was to alter the delicate balance that existed between the rival factions that made up the Grey Valley labour movement.

If the immediate realignment of local politics owed a great deal to the war and events in Ireland, the future was to reflect the working-out of the forces unleashed by arguably the most dramatic event of twentieth-century history—the Russian Revolution. To radicals on the coalfields, the image of the seizure of power by the masses was a seductive one. It raised again the prospect of revolutionary activity with the miners leading the way. Men with agendas flocked once more to the Grey. And, in 1926, the Communist Party of New Zealand shifted its headquarters to Blackball. Its activist core became more assertive, organised a 'Miners' Page' in the *Grey River Argus*, organised their own paper, the *Worker's Vanguard*, and, to counter the influence of the Boy Scouts among the young, established a Young Comrades group with its own newspaper and uniform. As a young man who grew up as these new forces played themselves out, O'Farrell was drawn to seek an explanation of the world around him. His immediate explanations came in the form of academic articles about the formation of the New Zealand Labour Party, the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution, a biography of Harry Holland and, retrospectively, in the tour de force that was *Vanished Kingdoms*.

The biography of Holland provides a convenient bridge between these two radical surges. It also brings to the fore what were to become O'Farrell's lasting and productive preoccupations—religion and politics. These themes formed the core of a perceptive review by Noel McLachlan, an Australian historian about to complete a PhD at the London School of Economics. It appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1965 and, as was then customary, anonymously. In McLachlan's opinion, O'Farrell had produced a 'merciless anatomy of Holland's heart and mind and their confusions', and told the story of a militant materialist socialist whose heartbeats followed a deeply emotional and religious rhythm. As such, it was remarkable, McLachlan believed, that 'a biographer who evidently has

so little sympathy for his subject understands him so well'.<sup>30</sup> As a young man, Holland had abandoned the Salvation Army in response to its failure to deal with evident poverty, and put his faith in a socialist army that promised salvation on this earth. He became disillusioned as the young Australian labour parties made the compromises thought necessary to win electoral support, becoming parties of social reform rather than socialism, and he increasingly viewed industrial action as offering a shortcut to a revolutionary destination. In 1912 he was drawn to New Zealand by the prospect that the revolutionary potential exhibited by the Red Feds offered a more promising environment for his socialist aspirations.

O'Farrell's account of Holland's second bite at the socialist cherry goes straight to the kernel of Holland's dilemma: the same proselytising zeal that made him, as leader of the New Zealand Labour Party from 1919 until his death in 1933, the party's socialist conscience made him increasingly irrelevant to the political manoeuvring that was involved in making Labour a credible electoral alternative. Two years after his death, the leaders of the New Zealand Labour Government, flush with Holland's socialist mates who like Holland had crossed the Tasman to spearhead the Red Fed assault upon the capitalist citadel, erected a monument above Holland's grave: a small central figure stood naked, 'holding the fruits of the earth, looking up sightlessly into the heavens'. It was, O'Farrell wrote, 'a harsh commentary on Holland's endeavour' and a symbol of the Labour Party's preference for the 'mild Liberal tradition of Seddon' rather than the 'militant socialist tradition of Holland'.<sup>31</sup>

Greymouth and the West Coast form little more than the backdrop against which O'Farrell analyses Holland's political career. He was the member for Grey for little more than a year. When the 1918 electoral redistribution placed the mining communities on the north bank of the Grey River in the Buller electorate, Holland moved with them. He took up residence in Westport and it was from there that he led the New Zealand Labour Party from 1919 until his death in 1933. Holland's decision to live in Westport rather than Wellington was based on democratic and moral principles: he saw himself as the representative of the electors and believed he should experience their lot in life first hand. It was an attitude that flowed naturally into his views of political leadership. A more ego-driven leader of the NZLP would have preferred to be in Wellington—

30 *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 December 1965, p. 1212.

31 O'Farrell, *Harry Holland*, p. 213.

closer to the manoeuvring that the quest for political power encouraged. With the support of the miners, his tenure as the member for Buller was secure. A staunch and informed miners' advocate in parliament, as a local member he tended his patch diligently and remained a familiar figure in the Grey Valley coaltowns of Blackball and Runanga. Nowhere was Holland's immersion in community life better demonstrated than on Burns Night celebrations in Blackball where he spoke on the Scottish poet Robert Burns.<sup>32</sup>

The battles that preoccupied the party's Greymouth activists with whom Holland rubbed shoulders were, at one level, immediate and practical ones but, at another, deeply ideological. A new generation of coalfield radicals found in the Communist Party a new gospel of hope. In 1926 the party's national headquarters transferred to Blackball and briefly the township became the frontrunner in industrial politics. The remote township had its attractions for a party whose members and sympathisers might be numbered in the tens rather than the hundreds, and whose immediate strategy was to consolidate its base among the traditionally militant industrial workers. Moreover, the *Grey River Argus*, the nation's pioneer labour daily, recently purchased by the local labour movement, offered a means of spreading their message beyond the West Coast.

In O'Farrell's biography of Holland, relations with the communist cells on the coalfields are presented largely in the context of their impact on national politics. Thirty years on, in *Vanished Kingdoms*, he dwells more upon how the ideological push and shove taking place in the Grey Valley sat in the local environment. If the Communist minority set the political pace in Blackball, in Greymouth the prevailing political ethos was increasingly set by a small group of right-wing Irish Catholic activists whose agenda was firmly focused on improving the here and now. From their perspective, the political epistles emanating from Blackball were as unwelcome as the cold edge of the notorious 'Barber', a chilly, katabatic wind that snaked its way down the Grey Valley as an all-enveloping mist. The greeting 'comrade' favoured by radical activists from Blackball and Runanga marked out the ideological divide between the contending factions. Intended to conjure up notions of international brotherhood, it was seen, by labour reformists in Greymouth, as a 'distancing title, an ideological declaration rather than an affirmation of bond and common

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32 Harry Holland, *Robert Burns: Poet and Revolutionist*, edited by Dougal McNeill, Wellington, Steele Roberts Aotearoa, 2016.

cause'.<sup>33</sup> It symbolised an almost unbridgeable gulf between an 'army of dedicated fanatics' and a Greymouth 'Labour Party that was just that; Greymouth—local'.<sup>34</sup> To O'Farrell, the coalfields radicalism of the 1920s lacked the dash and sparkle of its predecessor, possessing neither the 'fiery Americanism' of a Pat Hickey nor the 'noisy larrikinism' of a Bob Semple. What remained was 'dour and tough' and doctrinaire.

The struggle between the rival strands within the Grey district labour movement took place largely away from the public gaze, in miners' halls and union offices. If the Grey Valley labour movement had a meeting place it was the *Grey River Argus* building. The *Argus* had been established at the height of the gold rushes in 1865 as a private publication and by the time it was taken over by the local labour movement in 1919 its presses were ageing and the building that housed them wore a dilapidated air. It sat less than 50 metres from the wharves and the rakes of coal wagons waiting to be emptied into the steamships tethered in the Grey River. During moments of high tide or when heavy rain had swelled its waters, the coal steamers rode proud above street level and squeezed the murky waters of the Grey across the streets, threatening to submerge the ancient presses. It was here that the ideological push became shove as the rival factions sought column space. The new generation of radicals from Blackball and Runanga established a 'Miners' Page' and used it to provide analyses of the worsening economic fortunes of the coalfields locally and internationally. Such commentaries frequently sat awkwardly alongside more cautious editorials or articles by Harry Holland providing summaries of the historical background to world events or a talk on Robbie Burns to the Scottish contingent at Blackball.

The Greymouth-based, Irish Catholic arm of the local labour movement was able to maintain a precarious ascendancy in this struggle for influence. It was from among its number that James O'Brien emerged to squeeze out T.E.Y. Seddon as MP for Westland in 1922.<sup>35</sup> The son of the great Liberal premier clawed his way back in 1925, but the engine driver from Runanga reclaimed the seat in 1928 and held it until his death in 1947. O'Brien was one of the so-called 'Irish invasion' of the first decade of the twentieth century. He came to prominence through the Westland Engine Drivers' Union and fit within what a British writer, Richard Hoggart,

33 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 262.

34 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 263.

35 See Seddon, *The Seddons*, pp. 348–49.

described as ‘the earnest minority’<sup>36</sup> of the working class: activists who were seeking to improve the here and now through self-improvement and voluntary representation of their communities in a range of organisations. For O’Brien, this had meant playing a central role in bringing the cooperative store to Runanga and serving on both the Greymouth and Runanga borough councils. He had been imprisoned for sedition in 1917 while opposing conscription. In the early 1920s he had become chairman of directors and manager of the *Grey River Argus*. By temperament and inclination he was thus a fit custodian of the interests of the Irish Catholic community and the pragmatic majority of the mining towns bent upon establishing a permanent place for themselves in the Grey Valley.

To O’Brien and the group of reformist and dominantly Irish Catholic activists from whose ranks he had emerged, the Communists in the coaltowns seemed not so much to promise better things to come as to imperil the precarious nature of survival in the Grey. O’Farrell characterises the tussle between the rival Catholic and Communist arms of the Greymouth labour movement in terms reminiscent of the struggles between Don Camillo and Peppone, the fictional Catholic priest and Communist mayor of Giovannino Guareschi’s *The Little World of Don Camillo*.<sup>37</sup> In O’Farrell’s Grey Valley, James O’Brien and Paddy O’Farrell stand as the representatives of Catholicism. Their communist *bête noire* was ‘bloody Jack Doyle’. Of Irish Catholic descent, he had come to the Grey Valley from Napier to join an underground cell of Irish bent upon avoiding conscription during World War I. When the Communist Party set up its headquarters in Blackball in 1926, Doyle and his wife Sophie became among its most active disciples. Their combined zeal maintained the production of the party organ, the *Workers’ Vanguard*. Together with the talented Angus McLagan, a young Scot who was to become secretary of both the Communist Party and the national union of coalminers, the United Mine Workers of New Zealand, they spearheaded local radicalism. When the Communists withdrew from Blackball, McLagan aligned the United Mine Workers with the NZLP; Doyle’s status as the Communist Party’s most dedicated disciple assumed, in the minds of many, almost demonic proportions. O’Farrell paints a vivid picture:

36 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1957, p. 318.

37 See Giovannino Guareschi, *The Don Camillo Omnibus*, London, The Companion Book Club, 1955.

His distinctive mode of cycling, leaning forward grimly into whatever the gales that lashed him, with bulging eyes and total dedication to piston-like pedalling encapsulated his confrontationalist political attitude. He and his velocipede were hurtling with total commitment towards the beckoning final barricades ... [with] the humourless intensity of the totalitarian zealot ...<sup>38</sup>

To the moderate men of the Greymouth labour movement, Doyle was a maverick wrecker, a troublemaker, a political liability but still exasperatingly a part of the local scene. It was precisely this bellicosity and physicality that made him the idol in the physical world of bush, pit and wharf that shaped the lives of young men of his day.

The political world of the Grey was, as O'Farrell saw it, masculine in its ethos, as directly physical as its landscape. His father, 'Paddy', had embraced both; in 'the black rainstorms that hurled so often from a tumultuous Tasman into a Greymouth huddled in creaking timber and tin houses clinging to the foot of a mountain range, it was easy enough to cast oneself as an intrepid battler at the world's edge'.<sup>39</sup> In *Vanished Kingdoms* he contrasts this response to the Grey with that of his mother. After the ordered and structured life she had known, the Grey she confronted for the first time in 1920 was chaotic and raw. The miners appeared 'a strange lot of dark and silent folk who seemed of a piece with their coal and timber economy and their incessant grey rain'.<sup>40</sup> At first even the local Irish fragment of the town lacked much resonance with what she had known. To her ear, 'the natural Irish cadences of the colonies were raucous and beery, or heavy with false sentiments of rebellion and violence'.<sup>41</sup> It was years before she was able to shrug off the feeling that she was caught up in a 'barbaric place'.<sup>42</sup> Instead of the familiar tight communal life of the Irish village, Greymouth seemed thin and crude. Colonial life with its 'pervasive, chilling, contagious Protestantism'<sup>43</sup> bore heavily upon her.

It is a fundamental tenet of O'Farrell's treatment of Irish migration that the construction of an essentially Irish culture as a means of easing the transition from old world to new was simply impossible. There was little

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38 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 263.

39 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 137.

40 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 140.

41 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, pp. 84–85.

42 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 142.

43 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 87.

left to pass on. It had already been lost. The great cultural tragedy had already occurred. Gaelic Ireland, the real Ireland with its ancient stone face, had been largely obliterated during the eighteenth century. Famine had completed the rout, physically dispossessing those already in the throes of cultural dispossession. Thus it was that his mother, Mai O'Farrell, a child of late nineteenth-century Ireland, could not wrap herself in Irish culture as a means of easing the shock of the new. What she could and did do, as *Vanished Kingdoms* makes eloquently clear, was immerse herself in the Catholic Church. It was a decision that reached back to Ireland for its validation. The link was the Sisters of Mercy by whom she had been taught in Borrisokane. More than anyone else it was contact with the nuns at Borrisokane who were to provide the reassurance needed to cope with the strange colonial world she found herself in. The Mercy order had been in Greymouth since 1882 and to the Mercy Convent adjacent to St Patrick's Church, just a five-minute walk from the O'Farrell's home in Puketahi Street, there came young nuns Mai had known in Borrisokane. In their company and that of a small cluster of lay helpers, Mai shared in the rich prayer world of Catholicism. Its rosaries, litanies, devotional prayers and religious ceremonies offered an imagery and vocabulary that had the capacity to enrich the mind and expand the intellectual horizon. Its dense tapestry helped to counter the overwhelming colonial thinness and rampant masculinity.<sup>44</sup>

This perceptive recreation of the inner world of his mother, in many respects, encapsulates O'Farrell's ongoing contemplation of the West Coast. He came to describe himself as a New Zealander of Irish descent and Australian citizenship. The order is of course an accurate statement of a demographic reality; it might also be read as defining the terms of his engagement with the past. Together they form the critical vantage points from which he recreated the making and remaking of the Grey Valley from the last days of the gold rushes until the middle of the twentieth century. As collective markers of his identity, they embrace the world of ideas as refracted through the prisms of Catholicism and socialism and the communities each helped shape within Australasia. The rubbing together of these offshoots of European intellectual life, as virtual wilderness confronted industrial capitalism and colony struggled to become nation, is at the heart of O'Farrell's thinking about the Grey Valley and its people.

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44 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, pp. 76–77; and see also Patrick Morgan's review of *Vanished Kingdoms*, 'The Irish in Australasia', *Quadrant* (Sydney), vol. 35, no. 3, March 1991, pp. 72–76.

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