

Dylan Hyde, *Art Was Their Weapon: The History of the Perth Workers' Art Guild*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, 2019, pp. 368, RRP \$34.99 paperback.

Writer and historian Dylan Hyde's recent book *Art Was Their Weapon: The History of the Perth Workers' Art Guild* transports readers back to Perth in the 1930s and 1940s to tell the story of a radical cultural and political force. The Workers' Art Guild, with its left-wing inspired ideals, was revolutionary in its embrace of fresh perspectives in the otherwise provincial and geographically isolated city. Indeed, many of its members found themselves at the mercy of police in the lead up to WWII for their connections to the Communist Party and Hyde's account of this period in Australia's cultural history resonates in a contemporary climate of ideological unrest by illustrating the power of art to challenge and subvert ingrained social and political norms.

Perth at the time was a conservative and parochial society which had been ravaged by the Great Depression. However, by the mid-1930s Western Australia had somewhat recovered and Perth's theatre scene, which had likewise been decimated by the Depression and a state government-imposed entertainment tax, was resurrected. Hyde's illuminating study provides an ambivalent overview of the time then, with a focus on the personal and professional lives of the movement's key figures such as Katherine Susannah Pritchard and Keith George, alongside reflections regarding the influence of the Communist Party on artists living and working in Perth at the time.

Prichard and George met one another through mutual contacts in the Perth theatre scene in October, 1931. Prichard at this time was devoting eighteen hours a day to her work with the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) whilst George (not a member of the CPA but nonetheless a 'fellow traveller') threw open-house parties 'where guests discussed drama and hotly debated "ways of changing the world"' (23). By 1935, following international trends, discussion was underway regarding the establishment of a Perth Workers' Theatre. Hyde's book draws upon extensive biographical research into each of these figures which reveals that whilst 'George and Prichard shared a similar social background... their political expression differed markedly' (49). George appreciated Prichard's 'motives and experience' yet he was at first reticent about 'their ability to work cooperatively' on the formation of the proposed group. Whereas Prichard insisted on theatre being used as a political tool, George was focused on staging the best and most varied drama, irrespective of its politics. Still, this difference was not an irreconcilable one and George's respect for Prichard's intellect was likewise matched by her faith in George which Hyde describes as 'absolute' (50).

In May of 1935, the formation of the Perth Workers' Theatre was announced in the national drama magazine *The Playbill*, the group already busy rehearsing three short plays under George's direction. By June of 1936 the Workers' Art Club commenced its first season of staged drama. The group's production of the play *Till The Day I Die* was reviewed by theatre critic Paul Hasluck in *The West Australian* who wrote, 'There can be no mild words about the first major public show of the Workers' Theatre' (66). Indeed, the radical nature of the Workers' production caused many state

governments to prohibit its performance, a decision which evoked 'widespread public denunciation' (74). Thus, in its stirring of dissent and controversy, 'the Workers' Art Guild theatre was an integral arm of the CPA's Popular Front work' (85).

Hyde's book, drawn from exceptionally meticulous research, is an act of retrieval in many ways. Hyde recalls a time and place in Australian history which is not only vastly different from our contemporary moment, but likewise largely forgotten and rarely shared. *Art Was Their Weapon* is rich in knowledge of cultural and political figures and events that we might today benefit from through attention to the relevance they carry in the context of our own social and political climate. The book is a reminder that progress is not permanent and that art, when used as a weapon of resistance, is one of the most effective tools in bringing about social and political change. It reminds us of the importance of the arts not only as a tool for creative expression but also as a means of unifying people via meaningful collaboration and participation.

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