

Chapter Seven

The Master Worker

*John Dwyer, the Active Service Brigade
and the Labour Movement, 1895-1900*

One of the worst types of men, stumping the country,
travelling on trades unionism, and should be exposed.¹

In January 1897 a flier announcing a conference to discuss the formation of an anarchist party caught the eye of a inquisitive journalist. His curiosity aroused, the reporter pursued the party's advocate, John Andrews, through the anarchist's world, and the strange ways of the Active Service Brigade. At the Brigade's Harrington Street barracks, amid the rough squalor of the Rocks, he was confronted by a locked door. Walking down into George Street, he was told by a passer-by to seek the Brigade down 'Haymarket way' - down the distant, southern end of the street, near the Belmore Markets. The reporter was entering another world, with its own codes and rules: he was instructed to 'just go through the Suez Canal and turn to the left, and you are at the back door of the doss. You'll be sure to find someone about.' Our dogged correspondent finally found the ASB's meeting room at 626 George Street. He walked up a narrow, dirty lane that ran off from the clamour of Haymarket, opened a gate and found himself in 'a sort of a hayloft'. Directly before him was a ladder, leading down into a back yard, and a 'finger-post', labelled, 'Isis

¹. A description of John Dwyer, Sydney District Council of the Australasian Labour Federation, General Meeting minutes (hereafter SDC minutes), 1 June 1899, in Labor Council of New South Wales records, SLNSW.

Lodge, Theosophical Society, meets here', and another notice, announcing that Mr. Dwyer of the Active Service Brigade attended between 2 pm and 5pm. The reporter went down the ladder and crossed the yard, and mounted another flight of steps into a dingy, uncarpeted room. A large red flag was stretched across a wall; beside it was a life-sized portrait of William Quan Judge, the deceased leader of the American theosophists. 'The furniture consists mainly of a row of bookshelves, a deal table, and several ditto forms, a music stool minus one leg, and an amateurish-looking chair. These are the anarchist headquarters.' Andrews sat at the table, 'as mild-mannered a man as ever scuttled ship, or cut a throat'. Andrews did not resent the intrusion: 'they were not going to murder anyone', he sardonically explained to the reporter. The conference consisted of half a dozen individuals debating anarchist ideas, continuing 'for some hours. The social part of the programme was dropped.'²

The reporter seemed a little disappointed by his experience. Anticipating a 'mysterious lair', he found ordinary men in poor rooms. The 'peculiar Sydney Anarchist' did not cultivate secrecy, but 'actually provokes publicity, and walks forth into the light'. The preservation of a clipping of the reporter's article in the Dwyer papers suggests the anarchists' craving for recognition. The journalist had promised an 'interpretation of terms': he could identify Andrews' cause and its symbols, but the reporter failed as an interpreter of their significance. The reporter was drawn to what he saw, the conditions of the anarchist's life - a life not so much secret as withheld behind the facades of Sydney's trade and busy streets. The reporter had not only found the bolt-hole of the anarchist Andrews; he had briefly uncovered the life of John Dwyer and his family, and the life

2. *Daily Telegraph*, 13 January 1897, clipping in 'Anarchy' volume, ML.

of the Active Service Brigade that Dwyer stubbornly maintained after his release from Maitland Gaol in December 1894.

In 1895 the *Australian Workman* rhetorically asked, 'who are the Active Service Brigade?'³ The criminal libel trial against the Brigade's leaders revealed the irreconcilable tensions between them; their imprisonment effectively dissolved their fractious union. In early 1895 John Dwyer revived the Brigade, maintained a barracks operation for unemployed men in Elizabeth Street, and later in the year opened new establishments. The Brigade also resumed at least some of its political agitations, although now less theatrical than its early performances. *Justice* was not re-established. Just as Dwyer identified himself with the Brigade's cause, the *Workman*, an organ of the official labour movement, cast doubt on its legitimacy. Who, the *Workman* implied, did the Brigade represent? By what right did Dwyer exercise leadership? By no more than a right to speak and forge an identity. The Brigade became a cause Dwyer could lead, and mould to his personal interests. The barracks became Dwyer's personal theatre, where he could broadcast his views and construct a radical alternative; there was limited scope for constructing it outside the barracks' doors, as his experience in the late 1890s would confirm.

There survives in Dwyer's papers a photograph taken outside the Brigade's barracks of two men and child displaying a flag, an image that at once clarifies and refuses to yield all its secrets (*see appendix 5*). The trio may be standing before the new barracks Dwyer opened in 1895 at 157 Elizabeth Street, although the photo may have been taken at any time between then and 1898. To the left, John Dwyer stands, clasping his son Henry's hand; from his other hand tilts a flagpole. On the right Andrews

³. *Australian Workman*, 18 May 1895.

pulls the flag out straight, revealing the letters 'ASB' surrounding two interlocking pyramids, symbolising theosophy's link between heaven and earth, between the world of radical politics and mystical belief. A union John Dwyer, Master Worker, Active Service Brigade, also self-consciously forged between the red flag and the portrait of William Judge, between the Active Service Brigade and theosophy. There is no record of this logo having been used during the Brigade's first, 1893-4 period; it is an innovation Dwyer brought to his personalised refiguring of the Brigade, and it makes regular appearances in cheap ASB fliers produced during the late 1890s (*see appendix 4*).⁴

The logo also cultivated an air of mystery, suggesting the workings of a higher consciousness, but also creating a gap between the privileged elect, and others simply baffled by its significance. The Brigade's flag has been read as a link to Judaism, the promised land, the promise of socialism.⁵ 'Symbols convey multiple meanings', and Dwyer could neither control

4. Hand-drawn fliers for the ASB's 'Lodging Department', and a business card for 'John Dwyer, Chief, Active Service Brigade', dated August-September 1899. The symbol was also used in fliers and in a rubber stamp during the period 1900-8. Dwyer papers, ML MSS 2184/2.

5. The photograph is in the Dwyer papers, ML MSS 290, box 3. Scates believes the photograph to have been taken at the Castlereagh Street barracks, and ascribes the symbolic influence of the flag to Judaism - 'Brigadeers were a chosen people who would lead Australia to socialism'. Scates, *A New Australia*, p.50. The *Australian Theosophist* also featured the symbol of the dual pyramids. Gilchrist observes that 'the logo of the Theosophical Society combines different symbols: the Egyptian ankh is surrounded by two interlocking pyramids, representing the union of heaven and earth, and encircled by the alchemical serpent, the ouroboros.' Cherry Gilchrist, *Theosophy, the Wisdom of the Ages*, HarperCollins NY 1996 p.3.

the interpretations made of the flag, nor perceptions of the legitimacy of the Active Service Brigade.⁶

Dwyer soon re-established the Brigade as an advocate - and an organiser - of Sydney's unemployed. In February 1895 Dwyer wrote to the new Premier of New South Wales, George Reid, announcing the ASB's intention of establishing two additional barracks to assist 'bona fide unemployed workers', and workers on low wages. Dwyer apparently saw the election of the Reid Government opening a new avenue of support for the ASB - perhaps he was encouraged by Reid's dependence on Labor support for a majority in the NSW Legislative Assembly. Aiming to make the barracks 'self-supporting', Dwyer sought Government seeding funds, although Reid does not appear to have responded.⁷

Dwyer also lobbied private enterprise: in February he appealed, as ASB 'Business Manager', to Lasseter & Co., the large Sydney retail and wholesale merchants, for a donation 'to relieve somewhat a portion of the unemployed of this city.' Dwyer said that he hoped to use the new funds to meet the cost of moving to new premises - 491 Elizabeth Street was too small, and each night the Brigade was turning men away. Dwyer claimed that the Brigade had served 15,000 meals in the preceding year, and provided beds for 'hundreds'. Dwyer also assured the company that the ASB were 'bona fide workers' who 'seek to distinguish between the deserving poor and those not so'.⁸ Dwyer may have simply been telling Frederic Lasseter what most businessmen wanted to hear: he continued to take in workers who may not have met a 'bona fide' standard, and whose

6. Robert Darnton, 'The Symbolic Element in History', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol.58 No.1 March 1986, p.219.

7. John Dwyer to George Reid 13 February 1895, ML MSS 290, box 2 'general correspondence'.

8. John Dwyer to Lasseter & Co., 2 February 1895, John Dwyer papers ML MSS 2184/2.

habits were distasteful to both Annie and himself. That same month Sydney *Worker* editor James Medway Day asked Dwyer to provide E.F. Kingdom with one or two days board and lodging. Medway Day promised to pick up the tab. On Medway Day's note Dwyer described Kingdom as 'a broken down person', suffering the ill-effects of drink or drugs: 'had 'em bad'.⁹

In the mid-1890s there was an obvious need in Sydney for the barracks - and any form of assistance that might be provided the unemployed. From 1894 and until the end of the decade unemployment in Sydney remained intractably high, as the effects of the economic collapse of 1892-3 lingered. Labour Bureau Superintendent Joseph Creer reported 'widespread' unemployment in 1895; it has been estimated that up to 26,000 men were unemployed in Sydney that year.¹⁰ Twelve months later, Creer referred to

⁹. James Medway Day to John Dwyer, 5 February 1895, John Dwyer papers ML MSS 2184/2.

¹⁰. Government Labour Bureau report for 1894, NSW V&P LA Vol.6 1894-5 p.455. It is difficult to accurately determine the proportion of the NSW or Sydney workforce unemployed in the mid 1890s. Assessments come down to making arbitrary selections - based on arbitrary selections. Using 1891 census figures, Coghlan estimated the total NSW workforce in 1895 at 471,887 - 382,385 males, 89,502 females. He then divided these into six classes, of which three are broadly relevant for Sydney working class purposes - Domestic, Commercial and Industrial, giving an app. total workforce of 282,947 males and females in Sydney in the mid 1890s. Of this total, 221,600 were males. 26,000 unemployed men represents 11.7% of the total. It must also be noted that the official unemployment statistics almost certainly underestimated the actual unemployed rate - virtually a matter of policy with the Labour Bureau's figures. Certainly in early 1895 there was sufficient concern at the unemployment 'crisis' to warrant an extraordinary union conference which called on the Government to initiate an urgent public works program. This analysis of Coghlan's figures and the unreliability of trade union and official returns is given some support by Forster. He cites trade union returns showing a *national* unemployment rate of 10.81% in 1896, although he adds that the figure is based on a small sample, biased towards skilled unions: 'In these circumstances, general unemployment could be severely understated.' Unemployment amongst unskilled male labourers would have been much higher than the colonial or Australia-wide average. T.A. Coghlan, *A Statistical Survey*

'community bewilderment' about finding a solution to the problem. There were still 2,500 men a month seeking work through the Bureau.¹¹ Creer complained that 'that class who do not like work' roamed the city streets and parks, causing trouble at the Bureau office with their 'rowdy' behaviour. The men were being stirred, Creer claimed, 'by a section of the unemployed and others', who attacked the government for its meagre efforts to create jobs.¹² No colony was doing more than New South Wales, Creer asserted, although this activity consisted of little more than marshalling unemployed men to level the ground in Centennial Park. Creer regularly urged the unemployed to try gold fossicking in the country. Creer believed it eased the strain on the public purse - and temporarily rid the streets of Sydney of a few unemployed men.¹³

When the fossickers returned to Sydney, with worn shoes and without a solitary nugget, or if they felt able to afford more comfortable accommodation than the pleasures of a park bench, they might have ventured to the Brigade's barracks, a centre of the agitation Creer so resented. By March 1895 Dwyer leased a second premises at 157 Elizabeth Street (despite Dwyer's earlier complaints, he did not close 491 Elizabeth Street at that time), and in November opened yet another barracks at 10-12 Harrington Street, 'near the Argyle cut' in the Rocks.¹⁴ A bed could be had

of New South Wales, NSW Govt. Printer 1895 pp.185-6; T.A. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, Vol.4, Macmillan Melbourne 1969, pp.2029-30; Colin Forster, "Australian Unemployment, 1900-1940", *Economic Record*, No.95 Vol.41 1965, pp.427-9.

11. Government Labour Bureau report for 1895, NSW V&P LA Vol.5 1896 p.455 p.729.

12. *ibid.*

13. Coghlan describes 'sand shifting' at Centennial Park as 'a useless occupation, which gave a pretence of employment.' Generally, the NSW Government's 'makeshift measures...satisfied itself that it was doing something to relieve unemployment, the existence of which it could not affect to ignore.' Coghlan, *Labour and Industry*, p.2030.

14. ASB fliers, 24 March & 5 November 1895, John Dwyer papers, ML MSS2184/2.

at 157 Elizabeth Street for six pence a night; lodgers could also have a bath or use the reading room. Harrington Street, in one of Sydney's poorest and most densely populated districts, offered rudimentary accommodation at three pence a night. Between 7-8 pm lodgers were offered a free cup of tea and bread.¹⁵

The barracks were an expression of political idealism and commercial enterprises, and well into the twentieth century their management provided the Dwyers' income. In the period before Dwyer's 1894 imprisonment, Dwyer, Dodd and Douglas shared a reasonable income of several pounds a week from the barracks. In 1895 the demand for low cost accommodation amongst Sydney's poor enabled Dwyer to maintain three premises. The scant financial records that survive suggest that Dwyer was not profiteering from working class misery.¹⁶ The Dwyers' drew a modest and uncertain income from the barracks. As the surviving accounts are specifically related to the properties (that is, they are not the Dwyers' personal bank passbooks or statements of accounts), it is impossible to precisely estimate the family income. A reasonable number of customers did not or could not pay; as Annie complained to John in 1894, he seemed to tolerate at least some non-payers - particularly if they helped keep the barracks in good order.

No accounts survive for the period before 1897, yet it seems that in late 1896 Dwyer struggled to keep the barracks open, at a time when Annie

¹⁵. *The Socialist*, 7 November 1896.

¹⁶. The discussion of barracks finances has been constructed from two different sources in the Dwyer papers: '1899-1900 record of expenditure' (re 10-12 Harrington Street, Sydney), Dwyer Papers ML MSS 290, box 1; and Commercial Banking Company of Sydney Ltd Passbooks, for the account 'John Dwyer, Active Service Brigade', 1897-1902, Dwyer Papers ML MSS 2184/5.

was nursing a new-born baby, Timm Stephen, born on 8 September. Annie's need to attend to the demands of their last child may well have contributed to the barracks' financial and managerial problems. John was as immersed as ever in his political and theosophical interests, having just taken over as acting editor of the *Socialist*. The Dwyer's managed to hold on, and during 1897-99 Dwyer firstly paid £2 10s a week, and later £1 7s 6d, to lease the Harrington Street premises (presumably, he gave up some of the space at 10-12 in order to cut costs). The income from Harrington Street was largely consumed by operating costs; the barracks barely broke even. There are some entries for payment of staff during 1898-9 - from a few shillings to a £1; none of the payments persist for a substantial length of time.

The family usually lived on the barracks premises, further blurring the line between barracks and personal income/expenditure. The barracks at 491 Elizabeth Street was also the Dwyers' home address from mid-1894 until 1897. Both Elizabeth Street barracks seemed to have closed by 1897, when the ASB's headquarters moved to 626 George Street. From January 1898 the family leased 704 George Street for £1 a week, a sum which a working class family could only afford if the property was attracting some offsetting income; most workers in regular employment did not earn much more than £1-2 per week. The Dwyer family stayed at 704 George Street until April 1901, when they moved to a Sussex Street address. The Dwyer's circulated around the city's poorest districts, searching for affordable family accommodation and properties for the barracks, at a time when housing and health conditions within those areas continued to deteriorate.¹⁷

17. Kelly describes the steady deterioration of working class Sydney housing during the late nineteenth century, with significant increases in population densities, and the number

'Industrial emancipation': The ASB & co-operative coal mining

A flier advertising the opening of Harrington Street in 1895 was authorised by John Dwyer, 'Master Worker of the Order'. The ASB had expanded its barracks operations and incorporated a new organisation, the 'Australian Order of Industry', whose objects were given as: 'Land, Mining and Industrial Co-Operation.'¹⁸ Tempted by the riches of the coal industry, Dwyer again scratched an entrepreneurial itch. The *Workman's* curiosity about the Brigade had been stirred in May 1895 by the news that the ASB had been granted a licence by the Reid Government to establish a coal mine. Unemployed Sydney men would work a co-operative venture at Wentworth Falls, in the Blue Mountains to the west of the city.

The mine was a typically ambitious Dwyer project. The leased area was extensive: an eighty acre site covering ten separate subdivisions of land owned by John Lebbeus Hordern, a scion of the Sydney retailing dynasty, and several adjacent reserves under Government control - including the famous falls, and extending down the escarpment to the floor of the Jamieson Valley. On 21 May 1895 Dwyer and Hordern signed a lease agreement to allow work to proceed on his land. The lease term was for fifteen years from 1 June 1895, with the annual rent set at £52 p.a. - although in an apparently philanthropic gesture, Hordern waived the first year's rent. Horden expected a profitable partnership: the lease stipulated that a galeage rent, or royalty, of three pence per ton on all coal

of inhabitants per dwelling, during the period 1871-1891. By 1900 these problems were 'acute'. Max Kelly, 'Picturesque and Pestilential: the Sydney Slum Observed, 1860-1900', in Max Kelly, *Nineteenth Century Sydney*, Sydney University Press 1978, pp.71-73, 76-78.

¹⁸. ASB flier, 5 November 1895, John Dwyer papers, ML MSS2184/2

extracted would be payable after the first year, and another royalty of two shillings per ton of shale.¹⁹

It is unclear how Dwyer attracted Hordern's interest. Horden may have been impressed by Dwyer's ability to win at least some measure of government support. Reid's Mines Minister, Sydney Smith, issued Dwyer a mineral licence in March, relieving Dwyer of the obligation to pay for the publication of notices.²⁰ Dwyer's attention to detail paid off: he wrote out notes - virtually a complete script - for an interview with the Minister, assuring Smith that tests revealed the land held 'coal in enormous quantities'; three tunnels had already been driven at the site. In a reasonable time he expected to establish 'a community of coal, iron and shale winners'. Dwyer estimated that they would need only a year to 'repay a good part of the outlay'. Dwyer was determined to succeed.²¹

The coal mining industry was fundamentally significant to the New South Wales economy in the 1890s - the source of domestic and industrial power, light and heating. Mining prospects reflected the relative prosperity of the colony. Coal extraction was both a capital and labour intensive industry, with little scope for the small-scale operation that could be attempted in the metalliferous mining industry - particularly in alluvial gold mining. The mid-1890s were a time of diminished demand for coal due to the lingering effects of depression, and an industry plagued

19. Lease memorandum between John Dwyer and John Lebbeus Hordern, 21 May 1895, John Dwyer papers, ML MSS290 box 1. The surviving documents fail to clarify if the Brigade would have been allowed to mine on or beneath public reserves.

20. Under Secretary of the NSW Department of Mines to John Dwyer, 20 March 1895, John Dwyer papers, ML MSS290 box 1.

21. Notes for an interview between John Dwyer and the Minister for Mines, noted, 're my interview on the 4th to-day', John Dwyer papers, ML MSS290 box 1.

as a result by underemployment; conditions that in turn aggravated industrial disputes, particularly on the northern coalfields.²² Given that there were at least three tunnels already driven at the site, the Wentworth Falls mine had presumably been previously worked and abandoned, no doubt as a result of the discouraging economic conditions.

Echoing Arthur Desmond's anti-Semitic rhetoric, Dwyer claimed the Wentworth Falls project would prove 'we can run a coal industry as well as any member of the soft goods "shent-per-shent" fraternity' (Dwyer's target was William McMillan, director of the soft goods merchants McArthur & Co. and Associated South Coast Collieries).²³ Despite his optimistic report to the Mines Minister, Dwyer understood the difficult task before the Brigade. In an 1895 manuscript Dwyer lashed coal owners who treated their workers as 'wage slaves': the 'Law', he lamented, 'denies access to coal to the mere miner...except at the will of somebody of somebody else and under many restrictions.'²⁴

Expressing an immigrant's mentality of bitter disillusionment and persistent hope, the Australian Order of Industry's constitution declared that 'We do not think, that in a young and fruitful country like this, anyone ought to want the necessaries of life, nor be subjected to the

22. Ray Markey, *The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney 1988 pp.74-77; Robin Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, Melbourne University Press 1963, pp.89-94.

23. *Socialist*, 10 September 1895. The controversy over the Coal Mines Regulation Bill revealed the class divisions rending NSW society in the late nineteenth century. The Bill was first introduced in 1889 but was not passed by the NSW Parliament until September 1896 - with a clause providing for an eight hour working day deleted, although with a mining union backed 'weighing clause' - providing for fairer piece work rates for the employee - retained. Gollan, *Coalminers of NSW*, pp.97-105.

24. 'What is the State or Government?', c1895, John Dwyer papers ML MSS 2184/3.

poverty pangs of old European social conditions.' Industrial emancipation would not be won by revolution or political agitation, but by 'social co-operation, intelligently and loyally worked', achieving through rigorous self-improvement 'healthy, happy, rational lives, with wholesome surroundings while we labor.' The constitution was signed by John Dwyer, Master Worker, Thomas Geary, General Secretary, and Annie Dwyer, 'Honorable Treasurer' (the only time Annie's name is cited in relation to John's political activism).²⁵

Seven members of the Order's 'Robert Emmett' Section No.9, dubbed the 'pioneer party', agreed to work the site in August 1895.²⁶ Firstly, the men would construct a 'rail, tram or cart road' to give access to the mine site (Dwyer hoped to lay a spur line to the main western rail line, a few miles to the north of the mine); they would then proceed to mining operations. The terms of their employment provided a token £1 per annum payment, plus rations and work clothes for a forty-eight hour, six day week, 'digging, building, sawing, form work, gardening, sinking for coal or other minerals or whatever may be required by John Dwyer or his agents'.²⁷ Dwyer would also provide 'tents, tools and mining stores', as 'funds permit'. The workers were also entitled to earn a shareholding in the venture: profits would be held by Dwyer, who, after paying 5% into ASB

25. Constitution of 'The Australian Order of Industry, generally called the Active Service Brigade', John Dwyer papers, ML MSS2184/5.

26. No.9 was the only section of the order which seems to have seriously functioned. A September 1895 notice announced that 'Balmain No.1' would meet and hold elections for officers at the Unity Hall corner, although little seems to have come of it. *The Socialist*, 10 September 1895.

27. Industry wages for labourers varied from 5s 6d to 7s a day, or about £100 per annum, although short working weeks imposed by the lack of demand in the mid 1890s meant that workers might earn half these amounts. Nonetheless even around £50-60 per annum was a significant improvement on £1! Markey, *Making of the Labor Party*, p.77.

funds 'and all other charges or deductions necessary', would divide the remaining balance into equal shares for each worker. The pioneer party was subject to a strict disciplinary regime. All members were to 'faithfully obey the lawful commands of John Dwyer', and faced instant dismissal for absence without leave, drunkenness, disobedience to lawful orders, wilful damage to persons or property, dishonesty, fighting or idleness.²⁸

Tom Geary kept a log book of the work at the site, prefaced by a series of instructions in Dwyer's hand, indicating his demanding standards: date of offences committed and trials, names of offenders, fines, forfeitures or penalties inflicted, weekly totals of work completed. The rest of the log book consists of three pages, with a few scribbled annotations. The first page notes 'report by General Secretary of the following men' - the rest of the page is blank. The facing page noted that each man had worked thirty-three hours during the week ending 23 August. The men were probably still engaged in clearing the site, using hand tools; they do not seem to have had substantial mining equipment of any kind. The final page marked the collapse of the project in early September. On 1 September Geary noted that Donnelly and Byrne refused to work during the afternoon. On 12 September Geary gave up and left for Sydney. MacKenzie noted in the last entry on 14 September that only four men were still working the site - three men worked a total of forty hours; only one worked forty-eight.²⁹

Despite the imminent collapse of the project, Dwyer urged readers of the *Socialist*, 'if you have a pound or two', to invest in the mine. Investors

²⁸. Constitution of the Robert Emmett Order of Industry, 16 August 1895. John Dwyer papers, ML MSS2184/5. A previously issued affidavit dated 7 May 1895, and which the charter seems to have superseded, is in the Dwyer papers ML MSS 290 box 1.

²⁹. Log book of the Robert Emmett Section, John Dwyer papers ML MSS2184/5.

could purchase 'Labor Notes' issued at prices ranging from 2s 6d to £1, aiming to raise at least £1,000 in capital and entitling the investor to a 'fair return'. 'The minerals are there, and we can get them.' Dwyer claimed 'these notes will be guaranteed by the labor of solid workers pledged to redeem them', and 'the men at the coal-mining settlement are proving themselves to be real sticklers at their work', despite 'sneers, ridicule, storms and hardships'. They had already proved that 'Labor organised from its own ranks can work and create wealth without the assistance of the Bank shark, Jew swindlecate, or holy financier. In a few months every reader of this notice can burn the coal these socialists hew.'³⁰

By July 1896 Dwyer was again lobbying the Minister, trying to delay the cancellation of the mining licence, which he had 'failed to execute', in relation to the Wentworth Falls site. He was granted a three months extension, although the Minister refused Dwyer's request for funds to purchase an engine to enable the construction of a spur line from the site to the main western railway.³¹ On 22 October Dwyer was presented with another demand to execute his licence or face cancellation; he does not appear to have sought another extension.³² It seems unlikely that Hordern held Dwyer to the terms of the lease. No rent was payable for the first year and, as no mining had been conducted, there was no source of revenue.

Some years later John Andrews, writing a history of the Active Service Brigade in *Tocsin*, sympathised with his friend's frustration at the

³⁰. *The Socialist*, 10 September 1895.

³¹. Under Secretary of the NSW Department of Mines to John Dwyer, 11 June & 16 July 1896, John Dwyer papers, ML MSS290 box 1.

³². Under Secretary of the NSW Department of Mines to John Dwyer, 22 October 1896, John Dwyer papers, ML MSS290 box 1.

collapse of another venture that seemed to promise so much. The mine was 'a bold conception', however, 'certain promised assistance was not forthcoming, and having many worries at the time, and nobody associated with him who could satisfactorily [organise] this unexpected obstacle, he was forced to let the matter drop. By this time the members of the Brigade were to be counted by thousands.' Andrews declared the venture a success: 'every man who was enlisted was thoroughly instructed in the co-operative and socialist economic principle'. Although at the time 'their comprehension was often superficial' many now understood 'the true nature of capitalism.'³³

The Brigade, not having 'thousands' at its disposal, could barely rally seven men to consistently work the site. Dwyer had no enthusiasm for leaving Sydney to lead or discipline them. Few of those men would have abandoned that wind-swept cliff-top with a favourable impression of co-operative principles, although the Wentworth Falls mine did not fail because of the impracticality of socialism or co-operation. The project certainly suffered from poor planning, lack of capital and skilled labour. The venture also suffered from Dwyer's determination to play the remote but absolute Master Worker, to dominate the structures he conceived of, masking that control with elaborate rules, subordinate officers and membership codes - although no-one could defy an order from him.³⁴ Dwyer might rage at the conditions faced by the unemployed but he could

³³. *Tocsin*, 24 May 1900.

³⁴. The vexed issue of leadership often complicated the success of other co-operative schemes - Robert Owen's New Lanark - '[Owen] did not understand that New Lanark was a machine which he himself had built and which he had to control and keep going' - or William Lane's New Australia - one of Lane's disillusioned followers described him as never really a socialist, but an 'uncompromising individualist', who 'preferred to crush rather than conciliate those who did not see things as he did'. Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station*, Macmillan London 1983 p.95; Gavin Souter, *A Peculiar People*, p.225.

not effectively co-operate with them. Dwyer and Andrews refused to plainly face the consequences of failure - a characteristic revealed in their willingness to pass the blame for the project's collapse to others. Dwyer could not still the urge to manage and rule, or to shrug off the disciplinary instincts of the foreman from Shadwell Basin. Dwyer was struggling to overcome his own alienation: it was likely that he felt the sting of sneers, ridicule, storms and hardships far more keenly than the mine workers. Dwyer brought his own history with him to the construction of the Order's rule book, and that history unravelled his aims even as he wrote them down.

Not all the ASB's campaigns failed: the barracks did help, as Dwyer claimed, many unemployed men endure the worst effects of the depression, sparing at least some 'the bitter and humiliating bread of charity organisations', the fate of one 'homeless' correspondent to the *Socialist* in 1896.³⁵ During 1896 the ASB went 'on the warpath' to aid the Foster family, facing eviction from their home at 269 Sussex Street.³⁶ The father was dying; the family furniture had been seized by 'loan sharks'. Two children of working age, both girls, were unemployed; one had recently lost her position as a domestic servant - for which she had received a mere three shillings a week, although she was twenty years old. The Brigade formed a vigilance committee and established a relief fund to help the family.³⁷ The Brigade also considered direct action, in the form of the 'Irish boycott' - a suggestion that *Socialist* readers refuse to deal with the landlady persecuting the Foster family. In August the family received 'a visit' from their landlady, who 'was kindly received by one of the ASB

³⁵. *The Socialist*, 21 November 1896.

³⁶. *ibid.*, 18 July, 1896.

³⁷. *ibid.*, 8 August 1896.

vigilantes. The family are not yet evicted'.³⁸ By October the ASB had arranged a new house for the Fosters. The Brigade paid the first week's rent and covered the removal costs.³⁹

The ASB always faced difficulty maintaining a consistent campaign on behalf of the marginalised poor, while its own activists - Dwyer and a few friends, with whom he often fell out - struggled to make a living.⁴⁰ There were so many families like the Fosters in need of help. The tensions and the lack of resources often proved too much to bear. The barracks proved a focus for ASB activities, and a source of recruits, but by the late 1890s the Brigade existed as little more than a vehicle of Dwyer's idiosyncratic schemes and campaigns. Through it all he enjoyed the loyal if diffident support of John Andrews, who commemorated and exaggerated Dwyer's struggles. In 1900 Andrews insisted that 'some "active service" has always been going on, often when the outer world has known the least about it.'⁴¹ In 1899 Dwyer tried to establish another co-operative mining scheme: gold-digging at Nerriga, near Braidwood in southern New South Wales. The Nerriga dig collapsed in recrimination, and resentment of Dwyer's control.⁴² Dwyer continued to campaign on behalf of the unemployed, and tried to organise them into an effective industrial and political force. Dwyer sought to achieve this by closer identification with the NSW labour movement, and at times, through political networks outside

38. *ibid.*, 22 August 1896.

39. *ibid.*, 3 October 1896.

40. Geary and two others attempted a crudely executed takeover of the barracks in late 1896, apparently jealous of the Dwyer's income. It resulted in some legal sabre rattling that does not seem to have reached a court. 'Statements by John Dwyer in relation to a conspiracy to defraud', John Dwyer papers ML MSS 290.

41. *Tocsin*, 24 May 1900.

42. Papers related to a mining lease at Nerriga, 1899, John Dwyer papers ML MSS 290 box 1.

organised labour. In all these activities he attempted to establish an important role fulfilled by John Dwyer.

'Undeserved recognition': Dwyer and the labour movement

The iconoclastic radicalism of the Active Service Brigade meant that Dwyer's political agitation was usually conducted at the periphery of the mainstream labour movement. Yet Dwyer made repeated efforts to participate in the unions and the ranks of the Labor Party. He almost succeeded in carving out a role as a LEL organiser in 1892. He seems to have remained a member of the LEL and its successor, the Political Labor League, throughout the 1890s and into the new century. Dwyer resisted joining the exodus of socialists following the 1898 conference decision to weaken the PLL's commitment to socialism.⁴³ A range of newspaper clippings Dwyer kept indicates his sympathy with discontented socialists and working class critics of Labor.⁴⁴ In January 1898 Dwyer chose an article that recorded a verbal savaging dished out to Labor MPs Billy Hughes and George Black. The MPs conducted a public meeting from a 'convenient window' of the Wynyard Hotel in Erskine Street. The gathered workers greeted the pair with their dissatisfaction over Labor's continued support for the Reid Government; they demanded reform of the reactionary NSW Legislative Council (which blocked Labor initiatives), and action against 'alien races'. Hughes and Black attempted to respond amid 'a storm of interjections', including 'time, you windbag!' and 'take the lolly out of

⁴³. For details of the socialist split see Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism*, chs.12-13; Ray Markey provides a useful summary of the relevant historiographical debate. Markey, *Making of the Labor Party in NSW*, pp.230-2.

⁴⁴. Unidentified newspaper clipping dated 15 January 1898, in 'Political Labour League, handbills, press cuttings and platforms'. This volume, held in the Mitchell collection of the SLNSW, has been separated from Dwyer's manuscripts some time after he deposited its contents in 1916-17. Its contents and their time range - 1890-1916 - clearly identify the volume as 'Dwyer papers'.

your mouth'. Black, indignant at this treatment, lost his temper and declared that 'no change of ministry you are ever likely to get will raise your wages or give you permanent employment.'

Although Dwyer remained loyal to the Labor cause, Black's unintended revelation of the hubris of the elected representative - and his political impotence - undoubtedly fed a conviction in Dwyer's mind that the powers of the Labor politicians had to be strictly controlled by the PLL executive. In November 1897 Dwyer and James Moroney opposed a recommendation by the Sydney District Council (the NSW union peak council⁴⁵) that all Labor MPs should have the right to sit on the PLL executive. Dwyer told the SDC meeting that this would make the unions a virtual prisoner of the parliamentarians and the PLL's political compromises. 'He did not see why this Council should be made the scapegoat to whitewash the executive of the PLL.' Dwyer proposed an amendment to have the parliamentarians' numbers on the PLL executive limited to seven; he failed, and the 1898 conference duly approved the SDC recommendation. Moroney announced his breach with the PLL at the same meeting, stating that 'he had decided to sever his connection with the Political Labour Movement at the end of the year, and devote his leisure time to the [advancement] of socialism.'⁴⁶ The 1898 Conference also diluted Labor's commitment to socialism - reducing nationalisation to a long term aim. The powerful Australian Workers Union was determined to restrain Labor's ideological debates and concentrate the PLL's attention on the basic tasks of organising and winning votes.

⁴⁵. The Sydney District Council of the Australasian Labour Federation became known by its more familiar title, the Labor Council of New South Wales, in 1900. Ray Markey, *In Case of Oppression, the life and times of the Labor Council of New South Wales*, Pluto Press Sydney 1994 pp.34-5.

⁴⁶. SDC minutes, 18 November 1897.

Moroney and other socialists decided it was time to part company with the PLL, rather than bend to the climate of compromise.⁴⁷

A clue to Dwyer's enduring loyalty to Labor may be found in the same volume that preserves his newspaper clippings and LEL/PLL papers.⁴⁸ Dwyer seems to have kept almost every scrap of paper that recorded his involvement in the Labor Party. Dwyer preserved his correspondence with LEL Secretary Macdonald Mathews in 1891-2, the credentials that confirmed his legitimacy as a delegate to the 1902 PLL conference and the minutes that recorded his brief contributions to debate. In 1897 an opportunity emerged to step from marginalisation to an effective role in the labour movement. In August Dwyer was elected honorary president of the Federated Stewards and Cooks Union, giving him an opportunity to exert influence in union forums.⁴⁹

The Stewards and Cooks Union was revived in December 1896, the first concerted attempt to reorganise the union since its collapse in the Maritime Strike six years before.⁵⁰ Dwyer, who had remained a member of the union since arriving in New South Wales in 1889, was quickly absorbed by the problems of its members.⁵¹ In the absence of employer or government assistance, it fell to the thin resources of the Stewards and Cooks to establish a fund to assist the families of nine members who perished in the sinking of the *SS Tasmania* in August 1897. Over the next

⁴⁷. Ray Markey, *In Case of Oppression*, p.57.

⁴⁸. 'Political Labour League, handbills, press cuttings and platforms'.

⁴⁹. *Australian Workman*, 21 August 1897.

⁵⁰. *ibid.*, 26 December 1896, 23 January 1897.

⁵¹. Dwyer's 1889 contribution book is held by the Mitchell Library, but has been separated from his manuscript deposits. Federated Steward's and Cooks Union of Australasia, 1889 rules and contribution book. Mitchell Collection, SLNSW.

four months the union managed to gather just over £40 to distribute amongst the families, and the survivors left without work, their possessions lost with the ship.⁵²

A year after the union's revival secretary William Willcocks claimed membership had grown to 450 members. Employer animosity to the union seemed to diminish. Many unemployed members, or those awaiting their next passage, made good use of the reading room at the union's King Street office, near the Darling Harbour wharves. Willcocks was pleased that this gave the men 'an opportunity...to become better acquainted', and build a spirit of unionism. The union was recognised by some employers as an unofficial employment bureau, able 'to forward capable men to fill the vacancies on many of the boats.'⁵³ With funds in 'a flourishing condition', the union decided to appoint an organiser to assist the secretary.⁵⁴ Celebrating their success, the Stewards and Cooks held a 'smoke concert' in December 1897 at the Trades Hall. Labor MP Richard Sleath and John Cochran, the Secretary of the Sydney District Council were among the invited guests. John Andrews designed an illuminated address presented to Sam Smith of the Seamen's Union. Smith was honoured for the assistance and encouragement he had provided his sister union.⁵⁵

Assimilation into the labour movement brought political influence as well as prestige. In October Dwyer led a delegation to Labor's parliamentary leader, James McGowen, over the passage of legislation

⁵². *Australian Workman*, 21 August 1897; *Worker*, 20 November 1897.

⁵³. *ibid.*, 5 February 1898.

⁵⁴. *ibid.*, 8 January 1898.

⁵⁵. *Worker*, 1 January 1898.

reforming the colony's navigation laws.⁵⁶ The union also affiliated with the Sydney District Council.⁵⁷ In August 1897 Dwyer and Willcocks represented the union at an SDC send-off for visiting English unionist Ben Tillett.⁵⁸ Dwyer must have felt some kinship with this famed organiser of the 1889 London Dock Strike.

Dwyer continued to press the radical cause within the SDC. In October 1898 the Council considered a resolution to hold a union conference to discuss amendments to the Shops and Factories Act. The unions wanted provisions covering a minimum wage and limits on working hours included in the Act. Dwyer proposed an amendment that the conference support 'the direct employment by the state of all labour', and urge the NSW Government to nationalise the coal industry. Dwyer said that he would do anything to help factory workers, but the fundamental motive of the trade union movement was, he argued, 'the employment of the people by themselves as against their employment by capitalists.' A sweeping assertion of the obligation of the state to employ every man and woman, and the implicit notion of a working class able to determine their own employment, was a little too rich for the blood of a majority of SDC delegates. Dwyer's amendment was welcomed 'in principle', but nonetheless rejected, being 'foreign' to the practical aims of the conference.⁵⁹

⁵⁶. The bill laid down measures for greater safety in the maritime industry, including a tighter inspection regime of ships. It was eventually 'mutilated' in the conservative-dominated Legislative Council. Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism*, p.209; 1898 PLL manifesto, in 'Political Labour League, handbills, press cuttings and platforms'.

⁵⁷. SDC minutes, 19 August 1897.

⁵⁸. *Australian Workman*, 28 August 1897.

⁵⁹. SDC minutes, 6 October & 20 October 1898.

The rapid revival of the union disguised the chronic problems associated with organising stewards and cooks - just one group of workers trying to endure the industrial harshness of late colonial New South Wales. In October 1897 Willcocks complained that many stewards and cooks refused to join the union. 'They will not join until for every penny they pay into the Union they can get a sovereign back.'⁶⁰ In November a member, writing from 'a large inter-colonial steamer', ominously reported that he had been 'privately' informed by his employer that he could leave his job or quit the union.⁶¹ The union found it difficult to deliver wage gains for the members; many stewards and cooks were working for as low as thirty shillings a month, below even the basic wage of seven shillings a day.⁶² Industrial action was out of the question - memories of widespread job losses as a result of the Maritime Strike were still fresh. The attacks on unionism had been entrenched by years of protracted economic depression. Members also felt threatened by the increasing employment of boy labour as stewards, with employers using the boys to cut the already low adult pay rates.⁶³

By April 1898 the union was holding crisis meetings to debate these vexed issues, and the increasing victimisation of its members by employers. The union appealed to members to help 'raise the society to its old position' - the 'old' position of late 1897.⁶⁴ Union funds were depleted; by May Dwyer had taken over as *honorary* secretary of the Sydney branch.⁶⁵ Dwyer remained obstinately ambitious: in an attempt to encourage lapsed

⁶⁰. *Worker*, 30 October 1897.

⁶¹. *ibid.*, 6 November 1897.

⁶². *ibid.*, 10 September 1898.

⁶³. *ibid.*, 19 March 1898.

⁶⁴. *ibid.*, 16 & 30 April, 1898.

⁶⁵. *ibid.*, 7 May 1898.

members to renew, the union offered to 'cancel all arrears' and admit members to 'union benefits' on payment of the current subscription. Dwyer, who also described himself as 'the President of the Union for Australasia', persisted with campaigns against junior labour, and established a permanent fund to assist members and their families affected by the all too frequent shipwrecks.⁶⁶

At a meeting in September 1898 Dwyer also encouraged the idea of forming a 'maritime workers federation' - effectively amalgamating the limping Stewards and Cooks with the Seamen's Union. Sam Smith responded that the Seamen's Union might consider closer co-operation if stewards and cooks 'showed themselves awake to their common interests by banding together.'⁶⁷ The *Worker* also adopted a critical editorial tone. Although on many vessels stewards and cooks outnumbered seamen, the 'energetic' seamen were 'solidly united', while the stewards and cooks remained disorganised and poorly paid, with only a few in the 'nucleus of a union'.⁶⁸ By late 1898 even Dwyer despaired of rallying them to the union cause. The union's annual general meeting issued a desperate ultimatum - all members unfinancial as at 1 January 1899 'will be regarded as "scab" so far as the Union is concerned.' The AGM was the last recorded meeting of the Stewards and Cooks for several years.⁶⁹

The story of the Stewards and Cooks provides a vivid testimony to the tremendous problems facing the struggling unions of the 1890s. The *Worker's* unflattering comparison between the Seamen's Union and the Stewards and Cooks was a little unfair; the solid unity of the seamen was

⁶⁶. *ibid.*, 14, 21 & 28 May 1898.

⁶⁷. *ibid.*, 6 August and 10 September 1898.

⁶⁸. *ibid.*, 30 July 1898.

⁶⁹. *ibid.*, 5 November 1898.

the exception, not the norm. Hagan and Turner observe that 'trade union organisation reached its lowest ebb in Sydney in November 1899'.⁷⁰ During 1896-98 the Sydney District Council had only eight consistently financial affiliates, covering some 450 union members.⁷¹ In March 1898 an SDC meeting heard a report that several Sydney unions were 'defunct'; the Plumbers were down to twelve members. The Brewery Employees were forced to disaffiliate from the SDC due to the 'falling off in numbers', although several other unions that could not afford to pay affiliation fees, including the Stewards and Cooks, were allowed to maintain representation with the SDC after August 1897.⁷² Even the AWU, the only union organised across several colonies, was forced to close branches during 1897-98, and the *Worker* suspended operations for several months in 1896 as a result of financial difficulties.⁷³

In his report for 1897-98 Labour Bureau Superintendent Joseph Creer referred to the stubbornly high rate of unemployment, prolonged by 'the prevailing want of confidence and enterprise'. Creer attributed these conditions to the lingering effect of the 1893 bank crisis, and continuing disputes between capital and labour. The numbers seeking the Bureau's help fluctuated with the seasons, yet they averaged 4,000 a month. An abundant pool of surplus labour had allowed wages to fall 25-40%, 'by slow degrees', Creer estimated, over the course of the decade.⁷⁴

⁷⁰. J. Hagan and K. Turner, *A History of the Labor Party in New South Wales*, Longman Cheshire 1991 p.26.

⁷¹. Markey, *Making of the Labor Party in NSW*, p.164.

⁷². SDC minutes, 26 August & 30 December 1897, 10 March 1898.

⁷³. Mark Hearn & Harry Knowles, *One Big Union, a history of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994*, Cambridge University Press 1996 p.84.

⁷⁴. Government Labour Bureau report for year ended 30 June 1898, V&P LA Vol.1, p.637.

Union returns indicate very high rates of unemployment in key industries until the turn of

Many stewards or cooks had good reason to be cautious about joining the union - expending scarce funds on membership, while courting the risk of being black-listed by the ship owners and left unemployed. Willcocks complained that the men would not recognise the benefits of unionism; they refused to be manipulated, even by a cause initiated for their benefit. Stewards and cooks, like the labourers Dwyer urged to work the Wentworth Falls mine, had to make a judgement about their best interests. Forced to choose, many stewards and cooks feared the consequences of asserting themselves; the time was not yet right for a revival of the union. Dwyer had tried to intervene in social and economic circumstances over which he had little control, taking a risk on leadership, carving out a role for himself, and doing what he could for those men willing to band together. The Sydney District Council would soon blame him for the union's failure.

Dwyer's association with the Stewards and Cooks was not quite finished in late 1898. Six months later, in his capacity as the union's president, Dwyer emerged as the convenor of the Trades Federal Committee. The committee, organised by Dwyer and Trades Hall president John West, was part of a campaign by two Labor parliamentarians, William Ferguson and Richard Sleath, to support the 'yes' case in the referendum vote on the Federal Constitution Bill to be held in New South Wales on 20 June 1899. The Trades Federal Committee's support defied the determined opposition of the PLL and the unions to the bill.

the century. Markey concludes that 'improvements in employment from 1896 were gradual and uneven.' Markey, *Making of the Labor Party in NSW*, pp.39-41.

Labor had supported Federation of the Australian colonies since 1891, although by 1899 the PLL feared that the nation that would emerge from a 'yes' vote would have an parliament dominated by a conservative Senate, disproportionately stacked in favour of the smaller states. Labor advocated a single chamber federal legislature. The PLL was also concerned that the proposed fiscal regime would drain revenues from the larger, more populous states to the smaller states.⁷⁵ Sleath and Ferguson, representing electorates in and around Broken Hill in the far-west of New South Wales, reflected local support for the bill (support generated by Broken Hill's greater affinity with the smaller states - Broken Hill was very close to the South Australian border, and nearer to its capital, Adelaide, than to Sydney). There was a sharp Sydney-country divide in 1899 referendum, with Sydney emphatically voting 'no' and the country overwhelmingly joining the successful yes case. Sleath and Ferguson took advantage of a caucus decision to allow Labor members a 'free hand' on the issue; they argued, at public meetings around New South Wales, that the Constitution Bill was the best available compromise between the competing political forces of capital and labour, and that fears over Senate powers and fiscal issues were exaggerated.⁷⁶

The PLL executive rejected the right of the parliamentary caucus to allow members to break solidarity on such a vital issue. PLL members, with the active support of the Sydney District Council, turned out aggressively against Sleath and Ferguson, accusing them and the organisers of the Trades Federal Committee of treachery. The *Worker* contemptuously dismissed Dwyer and West: 'the names mentioned in connection with

⁷⁵. *Daily Telegraph*, 27 May 1899; Graham Freudenberg, *Cause for Power: the official history of the NSW branch of the Australian Labor Party*, Pluto Press 1991, pp.59-64.

⁷⁶. *Daily Telegraph*, 10 June 1899; Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism*, p.232.

[the committee] were a quite sufficient index to its character.' Dwyer received a sharp lesson, if he needed one, in what happened to laborites when they breached the code of solidarity embraced by the majority. West was condemned in the *Worker* for employing non-union labour to conduct plumbing repairs at the Trades Hall. The *Worker* claimed that Dwyer was 'widely known as the chief factotum of the "Stewards and Cooks Union", indeed, a prominent unionist has asserted that he *is* the Stewards and Cooks Union'. The collapse of the Stewards and Cooks could now be conveniently sheeted home to Dwyer; the Sydney District Council announced that they intended to conduct an inquiry into the management of the union and Dwyer, 'this Unionistic "Mrs Harris"'. Dwyer and West's illegitimacy was underlined by noting that a 'mysterious document', advertising a speech by Ferguson at the Trades Hall on 9 June, was not sent to 'any unionist of note'.⁷⁷ Dwyer and West were subjected to repeated vilification and ridicule in the labour and mainstream press in the days prior to the Trades Hall meeting.⁷⁸ The meeting quickly collapsed into farce, and personal humiliation for Dwyer, involved in a scuffle with a PLL loyalist - one of a number who took over the meeting and voted '5-1' against support for the Constitution Bill.⁷⁹

The Sydney District Council's inquiry into the Stewards and Cooks Union predictably found 'a most undesirable state of affairs', although it could only identify 'minor' offences - financial irregularities and an

^{77.} *Worker*, 27 May 1899. The reference to 'Mrs. Harris' comes from Charles Dickens novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which two journalists - Mrs Gamp and Mrs Harris - worked on two newspapers owned by the same proprietor - yet pretended to be independent. Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1961 p.538.

^{78.} *Daily Telegraph*, 1 & 8 June 1899.

^{79.} *Worker*, 17 June 1899; *Daily Telegraph*, 9 & 10 June 1899.

'indifference' to outstanding accounts. The SDC denounced 'the frantic efforts of alleged officers in endeavouring to secure undeserved recognition behind the protective shield of Trades Unionism'. Dwyer was described 'as one of the worst types of men, stumping the country, travelling on trades unionism.' The 'unanimous verdict' of the Council, the *Worker* reported, 'is that numbered with the industrial wreckage of the past is the Federated Stewards and Cooks Union of Australasia, whose once respected title has been unwarrantably used to lend an air of reality to an imaginary concern.'⁸⁰

Why did Dwyer become involved in the Trades Federal Committee? The widespread hostility to the Constitution Bill in Sydney, amongst both the labour movement leadership and the rank and file, must have been apparent to him. Given Dwyer's professed radicalism, it was also odd that he should support a campaign that was identified as a craven compromise with Labor's political enemies. A clue to Dwyer's motivation may be found in a brief note in his papers, written a few months after the referendum. On 5 September 1899 Dwyer scribbled a message on a business card. The 'strictly private and confidential' note from 'John Dwyer, Chief, Active Service Brigade' was addressed to NSW Premier George Reid. On the back of the card Dwyer wrote: 'Mr. Reid, Dear Sir, I sincerely trust that you will be very careful in handling the Labour Party.' On the front of the card, Dwyer added: 'all points are being worked against you'.⁸¹ It was common practice at the time for members of the public to give parliamentary attendants small notes and cards to be passed to MPs, either in the chamber or in their rooms. Conceivably, Reid may have received the card, and passed it back; he may never have received it. By 5

⁸⁰. SDC Minutes, 1 June 1899; *Worker*, 10 June 1899.

⁸¹. John Dwyer to George Reid, 5 September 1899, Dwyer papers, ML MSS 290, box 1.

September Reid would hardly have needed Dwyer's warning that his five-year old government, which had always relied on the parliamentary support of Labor for a majority in the Legislative Assembly, was about to collapse - on that very day. The fight over the Constitution Bill - which Reid had championed as vigorously as Labor had opposed - exhausted Labor's already flagging support for the government. On 5 September the Labor caucus met throughout the day to consider the fate of Reid's administration, finally deciding at 7 pm to transfer its political support to the Leader of the Opposition, William Lyne.⁸²

Sometime during that busy day of elaborately theatrical politics, of impassioned debate in the Assembly and tense anticipation and negotiation in corridors and committee rooms, John Dwyer decided that he wanted to be a player, a 'Labor Agent', as he envisaged in 1893. Six years later, Dwyer's secret play was redirected to assist his personal need rather than the cause of Labor. Dwyer inferred, to a Premier facing a crisis, that he had some access to privileged intelligence: John Dwyer could make a difference. Denied a recognised role in the forums of the labour movement, Dwyer tried to find a path to political influence around its margins, trading on his knowledge of the movement and its personalities. Dwyer was no better a judge of Reid, or the Premier's problems, than he was of labour movement reaction to the Constitution Bill. Reid was already finished by the time Dwyer sent him the card. Dwyer's note was another quest for recognition - desperate, if not undeserved.

A brief moment of recognition came in 1902, when Dwyer was elected for the first and only time as a delegate to the annual PLL conference. Dwyer

⁸². Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism*, pp.237-250.

represented the Lang Division, joining PLL heavyweights such as AWU leader Donald Macdonell, SDC Secretary Cochran, Federal parliamentarian Billy Hughes and PLL President Hector Lamond (who, as *Worker* editor, had been a harsh critic of Dwyer in 1899) in their deliberations on Labor's future.⁸³

The delegates to the 1902 conference were asked to tighten eligibility requirements for pre-selecting parliamentary candidates - a potential candidate had to be a PLL or a union member for twelve months prior to nomination. Pre-selectors had to have three months prior membership. The apparently modest restrictions provoked an intense debate. Arthur Griffiths MLA thought such rules placed 'stupid' impediments before PLL election preparations; yet fellow MLA and Australian Workers Union official Arthur Rae wanted to bar from pre-selection any man who had 'helped the other side'. Delegate Riley, of the Operative Plasterers Union, argued that if Labor was to grow, it could not do so narrowly; the Party had to take human nature as they found it. 'They could not make rules to make men honest.' Delegate Dwyer agreed: 'He thought the Conference had suddenly assumed a fit of virtuousness which did not belong to it.' Perhaps Dwyer felt that the implicit distrust in the amendments was aimed at him, and the radicals increasingly marginalised within the PLL. AWU Delegate Carter, who immediately followed Dwyer in the debate, may have reinforced Dwyer's suspicions. Carter wanted 'purification...even if they did lose a few men of doubtful character.' Human nature gave way to purification, and the amendments were narrowly approved after a division.⁸⁴

⁸³. Dwyer's credential certificate for the 1902 PLL Conference is held in the 'Political Labour League, handbills, press cuttings and platforms' volume.

⁸⁴. *Worker*, 1 February 1902.

A debate on technical education provided a brief insight into the grievances that had motivated Dwyer into political activism. Supporting a proposal to extend the state's technical education system, so that even the poorest children might access 'higher education', Dwyer observed that 'as a man whose education had been neglected in his young days he knew what it was to see monopoly in education'. Dwyer was also in the majority in support of a contentious resolution - that also went to a division - protesting the continuation of the 'cruel and costly' Boer War.⁸⁵

The Conference provided an opportunity to see Dwyer through his contemporary's eyes. *Truth's* conference coverage included caricatures of several of the delegates and satirical verses about them. A drawing of Dwyer, the 'Brigaderino' (see appendix 8), shrewdly identified as on 'Active Service not Anarchical', was accompanied by the following irreverent commemoration:

Mishter Dwyer the agitator,
 A most insufferable prater,
 His ears so long, so thick and fat,
 Make him look like an old man bat.
 While that hair-encircled facial gap
 Is like a donkey's thistle trap;
 And those who know him best do say
 That Mishter Dwyer knows how to bray!

He'd talk old Jawbone out of breath,
 Or a Yankee auctioneer to death.

⁸⁵. *ibid.*, 8 February 1902.

He loves the grafter with all his might,
And for the 'cause' he'll always skite,
But he takes fine care that he won't soil
His hands by doing honest toil -
He's quite content to loaf and shirk
On the men who wield the pick and do the work.⁸⁶

Dwyer had made some kind of a name for himself: he was a lazy windbag, and a crass manipulator of working class lives. *Truth's* derision was a harsh acid, reducing every artfully constructed reputation, leaching out the hubris: a play designed to wound and weaken, to corrode the powerful, the skilled or the assertive into mediocrity, to a human level where they could be recognised as one of us, one of the tribe. Rather than challenge prevailing authority, *Truth's* game reinforced social homogeneity - no one can escape being one of us. Dwyer preserved his own copy of *Truth's* coverage, so he must not have been too offended, and he may have welcomed becoming 'one of us'. *Truth* offered Dwyer a form of recognition, as an individual with an acknowledged social role; mocking the flaws of the working class champion, *Truth* also implied that some still spurned Dwyer as illegitimate and unworthy.

⁸⁶. *Truth*, 2 February 1902.