

May Holman, Katharine Prichard and the timberworkers

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ABSTRACT: Industrial conditions in the timber industry in the South-West of Western Australia were under stress between 1918 and 1925. Uncertain export markets, political debate over the respective merits of forestry and dairying, and conservative attitudes towards technological change all contributed to a reluctance to improve standards of occupational health and safety. Public attention was drawn to these issues by the novelist Katharine Susannah Prichard, with a novel *Working bullocks*, probably the first social realist novel with a Western Australian setting, and the trade union official May Holman, who became the first woman Labor member of parliament in Western Australia and whose maiden speech in 1925 had a major impact on political and community thinking. This paper seeks to explore the extent to which the contributions of these two women converged and led to significant change.

Jenny Mills has remarked on the coincidence that Katharine Susannah Prichard's novel about the South-West timber industry, *Working Bullocks*, was published in 1926, the same year in which May Holman brought about the Timber Regulation Act which marked the first major step to improving occupational safety in the industry. She conjectures that Holman and Prichard may have been friendly, 'although there is no record' (Mills 1986, p.85). This paper makes an attempt to explore the matter further. I should confess at the outset that there is still no record, although in the small town which was Perth in the mid-1920s it is inconceivable that their paths would not have crossed. Nevertheless these two prominent young women between them did much to raise public consciousness about conditions in the timber industry, although they were not natural allies, as their backgrounds differed considerably. May Holman came from a Catholic Labor family with strong trade union connexions; apart from accompanying her father to the Federal Arbitration Court she had not travelled outside Western Australia. Katharine Susannah Prichard was a journalist of cosmopolitan experience uneasily anchored in isolated Western Australia since her marriage in 1919 to the war hero, Hugo Throssell, and suspect among the respectable for her communist views and unconventional life-style (Hay 1996).

John Barkell Holman, May's father, was one of the numerous eastern Australian trade unionists who escaped the 1890s depression in eastern Australia to try his luck in the Golden West. He entered State politics in 1901 as MLA for Murchison, and was briefly a cabinet minister, but made his mark as a feisty and quick-tempered backbencher of strong egalitarian temper, unafraid to stand up to the party leadership. From 1907 he was secretary of the Western Australian chapter of the Timberworkers Union, on whose behalf he was a strenuous campaigner, especially in attempting to secure the 44-hour working week in the industry. Losing touch with the goldmining and pastoral

voters of the Murchison, he lost pre-selection for the constituency in 1921, but took it gracefully. He was rewarded in 1923 when the MLA for Forrest, the South-West electorate covering most of the timber country, unexpectedly died. He won the by-election for Labor, but never recovered completely from an appendicitis operation next year and died in harness in February 1925. In his last years he had worked hard for the restitution of the 44-hour week and had not disguised his criticism of the Collier Labor government when, after its return in April 1924, it was tardy in applying the shorter week to the State Sawmills (*Westralian Worker* 1925a).

For more than a decade May Holman had been her father's confidential clerk and loyal support. In 1914 she had been tempted into marriage with Joseph Gardiner, another Labor member of parliament, but her parents strenuously objected, apparently considering Gardiner not good enough for their daughter; he had been a Whim Creek publican before entering parliament. Unable to stand the pressure Gardiner left the State and quit politics. I shall say no more, because the story belongs to Philip Pandal who will publish it soon, except that the marriage ended in divorce or annulment, and May devoted herself to her father and the union. She shared his duties in the onerous years after the end of the First World War in 1918. At that time the industry was shaken by the controversy between Sir James Mitchell, the premier who, in the words of one colleague, 'wanted to get rid of karri trees and replace them with grass or turnips' and the conservator of forests, Charles Lane Poole, who believed that good forestry practice would ensure long-term sustainability for the industry. In an era of falling timber prices an uncertain future confronted many timberworkers.

When John Holman died his daughter offered herself for pre-selection for the by-election, defeating a male opponent by 581 votes to 500. She was then returned unopposed for the Forrest seat in April 1925, the first Labor woman parliamentarian in Australia, and second only to Edith Cowan who had been the independent conservative member for West Perth from 1921 to 1924.

The *Westralian Worker*, then edited by John Curtin, quipped:

She started as Miss Mary Holman.
Later she was Miss May Holman for short.
Now we have Miss M L A Holman for long.
(*Westralian Worker* 1925b)

Enthusiasm greeted her victory. 'It is many years since I have felt in Labor circles such exhilaration' wrote the veteran feminist Mamie Swanton (*Westralian Worker* 1925c).

The Labor government of Philip Collier complimented her by asking her to move the Address in Reply, and on 30 June 1925 she made an impressive maiden speech, almost entirely about conditions in the timber industry. Its impact came from specific first-hand experience. She said:

I have slept in a bark hut and have counted the holes in the roof. There have not been more than fourteen sheets of iron over my head, but I have counted sixty-three holes in them. Fortunately for myself I have not been there in the wet weather... At a boarding house in a particular centre, a tablecloth cannot be used. They put oilcloth in the table because the tablecloths would be ruined. The sheets of iron that are used for roofing are made to do duty time and again. The camps are shifted every now and again when cutting is started in a new place. I was in a camp at one of these places and the holes in the floor of the structure I was in were numerous, and the gaps between the boards were an inch wide and ... the breeze whistled around one's ankles ... At one camp the stables were situated in the middle of a group of houses and the flies were very thick. It was winter time when I was there, but one could not raise a cup of tea from the table to one's mouth without flies dropping into it. Surely there must be some way of improving these conditions. (WAPD 1925a)

The speech made a considerable impression, although three weeks later John Smith, Country Party member for the neighbouring constituency of Nelson, made a patronising rejoinder: 'I was impressed by her remarks and by the bleak picture she painted of the lives and conditions of the bush workers. I do not know whether someone had been pulling her leg or whether it was that she

was having her first experience of bush camps' (WAPD 1925b) - but he went on to say that he had known flooring much worse than she described.

Prichard, observing conditions less from first-hand experience than from the observant eye of a skilled and experienced journalist, confirmed the hardship of the timberworkers' lives in poor weather: 'During the winter months when the rain teemed through the trees, men working in the forest were drenched all day with the wet undergrowth and shivering leafage' (Prichard 1956a, p. 114) Of the housing she wrote: 'A fettle's wife died after having given birth to a baby in one of the wretched huts of defective timber far out near the end of the bush line. Everything in the hut was wet ... Neither the roof nor walls kept out the rain.' (WAPD. 1925b, p.178). She also wrote of the routine of timberworkers' wives:

Deb had seen her mother doing any and every sort of work, from ploughing, slaughtering a pig and salting him down, to drying fruit, making cheese and butter or jam, spinning wool from their own sheepskins, dyeing the thread in onion water and knitting it up into socks, singlets or jumpers. (Prichard 1956c, p.104).

It is easy to see how the combined impact of May Holman's speeches and Katharine Susannah Prichard's writing combined to create a climate of opinion propitious for the Collier Labor government in 1926 to introduce the Timber Industries Regulation Bill.

This legislation laid down minimum conditions and provided for a system of inspection. It was presented by a senior cabinet minister, Alex McCallum, prompting the leader of the Opposition, Sir James Mitchell, to inquire whether May Holman had been sidelined; but this was not the case. Instead of relying on anecdotal evidence about conditions in the forestry industry, she made a speech of two hours presenting a formidable array of official reports and statistics from many parts of the world (WAPD 1926a). Both sides of the Legislative Assembly supported the legislation as overdue, although some members of the Opposition worried about the powers of the inspectors. In the Legislative Council John Nicholson, a representative of forestry employers, moved that the bill should be read six months hence, a device which would have had the effect of quashing it. This was too much even for the conservatives of the upper House, and they defeated Nicholson's proposal, but accepted various amendments watering down the legislation. It was only on the last night of the parliamentary session that a compromise was worked out between three representatives of each house of Parliament, McCallum and May Holman being the Labor representatives from the Legislative Assembly (WAPD 1926b).

The outcome represented a significant victory. All the same, it may be a mistake to see Holman and Prichard as allies. Prichard's depiction of the Timberworkers' Union is not at all flattering to its officials, and might be expected to cause offence to members of the Holman family. In *Working Bullocks* an important character is the thoughtful young idealist Mark Smith, an intellectual who has picked up practical skills in a roving life and who seeks to persuade the timberworkers to greater militancy in the fight for better pay and conditions. In Prichard's narrative:

All the winter, fallers and mill workers...had been grumbling over their grievances, dreading to make protests for fear of the consequences. Mill stores held all the food supplies in the district and there was no way of getting supplies into Karri Creek except by the company's trains.... (Prichard 1956d, p. 169).

Although the 'truck' system under which employers monopolised stores and issued their own promissory notes had been outlawed since Sir John Forrest's government passed legislation in 1899, the *Westralian Worker* in 1925 still carried complaints that supplies in small timber communities were generally at the sole disposal of the employer (*Westralian Worker* 1925d). (14) This point was addressed in the Act of 1926.

Prichard goes on to write:

At first the timberworkers had been proud of their union; it had given them status, a sense of dignity and strength. But latterly membership had become a matter of paying dues or not paying them. The general secretary had an office in Trades Hall and a handsome salary paid from those dues. George Macdonald was local secretary in Karri Creek, but no more than half a dozen men attended the meetings he called (Prichard 1956d, p.169).

Prichard can hardly have been unaware that for eighteen years until February 1925 the general secretary with an office in Trades Hall had been John Barkell Holman. Nor can it have escaped her that after his death, while May Holman was acting secretary of the Union, that the position attracted the attention of Thomas John Hughes, a maverick Labor backbencher in the Legislative Assembly. Known to all as 'Diver', Hughes was a chunky, assertive larrikin populist, very popular with his working-class constituents in East Perth as a champion of the underdog and an indefatigable sniffer out of alleged corruptions. At thirty-three years of age and after only three years in parliament he was disappointed at his failure to gain cabinet rank and saw the influential secretaryship of the Timberworkers Union as a means to this end. (Bolton 1996).

After working for a few hours at the Hotham mill, his first experience in the industry, he applied for membership and campaigned for election as secretary. He said he would be not just a 'pensioner' but an active fighter on their behalf *Westralian Worker* 1925d. May Holman saw in this comment an implied criticism of her father, and she wrote to the *Westralian Worker* protesting that neither her father nor she was ever the 'pensioner' of any organisation *Westralian Worker* 1925e. (18) The Union ruled that Hughes had not put in enough time to be a bona fide member. He sought a legal injunction against this ruling and eventually fought the case to the Supreme Court (*Western Australian Law Reports* 1975). In style and character he did not resemble the idealistic Mark Smith of *Working Bullocks*, but his campaign may have reinforced Katharine Susannah Prichard's concept of the Union as a 'tame-cat' organisation incapable of fighting the workers' cause.

Hughes had a long career ahead of him as a troublemaker. Later in 1925 he supported the water-side workers against the Collier Labor government when it sent police against a maritime strike in Fremantle. Next year he broke with the Labor Party, and retired from Parliament to qualify as a legal practitioner, but returned as an independent member for East Perth from 1936 to 1943 harassing the Labor government of that time.

May Holman remained a member of the Legislative Assembly until her death following a motor accident in 1939. She had won five successive elections, but was never offered cabinet office and saw younger men of more recent parliamentary experience put into the ministry ahead of her. Her parliamentary speeches were not frequent, and were usually about the timber industry, child welfare, and women's rights. Perhaps her health told against her, as she suffered from asthma and was said to have a weak heart. Even at the time of her death she was one of the younger members of a caucus dominated by men in their fifties and sixties, and she was not sufficiently appreciated. It is tempting to regard her as a kind of secular nun who gave up marriage in order to serve her father, her father's union, and the much-enduring timberworkers and their families.

Prichard's humanitarianism on the other hand finds room for an undercurrent of sensuality which shades over into a sense of identification with the environment of the forest. It was her instinct to prefer the romantic gestures of direct action by militant workers rather than the patient and often boring accumulation of argument through which the Holmans achieved results. The processes of accommodation to the mechanisms of the parliamentary system and industrial arbitration do not make for stimulating literature.

But it would be unwise to press the contrast too far. Prichard's realism does not allow her characters an easy victory. The militant strikers in the end drift back to work, disheartened after a long contest of attrition with their employers. Holman on the other hand achieves eloquence in her reports describing the accidents and hazards threatening the lives and health of the timberworkers. She was never a passionless statistician.

Both Holman and Pritchard played a significant part in raising public consciousness about the working conditions of the timber industry. Both could claim credit when, with the active encouragement of a young and progressive Conservator of Forests in Kim Kessell, the younger generation of forest managers moved to promote active programmes of occupational safety.

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