

Max Bannah

Revolutionary cels

The Sydney waterfront, Harry Reade and Cuban animation

In 2008, the noted Cuban journalist and art critic, Pedro de la Hoz, contended that, “What’s most important is that with animation and other graphic media... we have an extraordinary weapon for the formation and transmission of revolutionary, patriotic and human values, and for cultivating the sensitivity, love and intelligence needed to help us conquer the future” (Stock 2009, p.126). In 1959, when the revolutionary government established an animation studio (Dibujos Animados) within the Cuban Institute of the Art and Industry of Cinema (Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industrias Cinematográficas, ICAIC), it also identified animation as ‘a tool of the Revolution’ charged with the task of serving the interests of the new state and its people (Agramonte 1996). Thus, for fifty years, artistic innovation in Cuban animation has sought to coexist with political and social struggle.

An Australian artist who was attracted by the opportunity to combine political commitment with creative expression and contribute to Cuba’s social and cultural reform process was the social realist, Harry Reade (1927-1998). In 1961, Reade went to Cuba where he was to have an influence on the development of the educational sector of that country’s animation production (Bendazzi 1994, p.386). This paper examines Reade’s progression towards involvement in the Cuban Revolution, and the way in which he used animation to serve an instructive social function. It also considers how his work in Cuba was informed by a network of political alliances and social philosophies that grew out of his experiences and creative development in Australia.

Reade was a waterside worker, journalist, author, dramatist, cartoonist, illustrator and animator who linked creative expression with radical action in society. He is a little known figure in documented Australian animation history but he had an influence on the early development of the educational sector of Cuban animation. Given the intense conservatism and anti-communist feeling that prevailed at the height of the 1950s and 60s Cold War years in Robert Menzies’ Australia, how was it that a Sydney wharfie could emerge to straddle two worlds with opposing ideologies to make a cultural impact on revolutionary Cuban society?

Harry Reade recounts the poverty and harshness of his childhood in the first volume of his autobiography, *An Elephant Charging My Chookhouse*.¹ This personal account of social reality during Reade’s formative years evokes the atmosphere of general hardship experienced by the Australian jobless and their families in the Great Depression. It helps explain his relationship with the society in which he lived, and provides an understanding of the intellectual framework that guided his personal development and his identification with working class communities. His story focuses on the conditions that determined his ideological beliefs and his rejection of capitalist life. Abandoned by his mother at the age of four, he spent ten years on the road during

¹ A ‘chookhouse’ is a chicken roost. The book’s title was prompted by the response to a question Reade asked his father: ‘What’s capitalism, Dad?’
‘An elephant charging a chookhouse, shouting, every man for himself!’ (p.101).

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the Great Depression with his tough, militant, unemployed and politically active ‘Wobbly’ father, Tom.² Living from hand to mouth through rough conditions experienced together forged an extremely close bond between father and son.

During the worst of it, my bed was the ground, my blankets the clothes I wore. My fire was the warmth of Dad’s body; my only shelter his strong brown arms. He was the house that sheltered me and the church at which I worshipped (Reade 1987, p.34).

They slept wherever they could find shelter on the edges of settlements in southeast Australia - under bridges, in empty railway stations, and in shantytowns of hessian-clad humpies. Many of the walls of these derelict shelters were covered with graffiti, which aroused and influenced Reade’s early interest in drawing (pp. 51-52). Popular comic strips in the Sunday papers were another stimulus. From an appreciation of his father’s ability to tell him what the comic-strip stories were about, Harry developed a keenness to read and, in time, a desire to write. This early literary enthusiasm - conjuring stories around comic strip layouts - enriched his formative years. Despite the absence of any formal training he taught himself how to construct drawings that carried messages (pp.66-67).

Throughout their travels, Reade’s father carried one of his few possessions, a small parcel of books wrapped in oil-skinned cloth. These were to form the cornerstone of Harry’s social and political credo.³ Their texts focussed on themes of collaboration and people’s liberation from labour. Radicalised by their influence and the experiences of his upbringing, Reade adopted a position in a class struggle that set him in conflict with the conservative culture of his Australian community. He had little formal education and from the age of thirteen he worked at many jobs. At various times he was a pastry cook, labourer, fisherman, able-bodied seaman, cane-cutter, foundry worker, rabbit shooter, museum assistant, and wharf labourer.

Always vehemently anti-capitalist, Reade was attracted to work in sectors of industry represented by militant trade unions. During the 1949 Coal Strike, he was employed at the Broken Hill Proprietary Company’s (BHP) steel works in Newcastle. As a known communist, his activities were monitored by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). Their files note that at public meetings during the strike, Reade was regarded as a Communist Party ‘strong arm’ man. Further, he was ‘suspected of being responsible for a fire, which destroyed a section of the BHP works known as the subliming plant’ (ASIO, File 17). Although he was not charged over the incident, he was blacklisted and found it hard to continue earning a living in Newcastle.

In 1954, Reade began work on the Sydney waterfront where the cultural activity of the workforce was sustained by the support of its militant industrial trade union, the Waterside Workers’ Federation (WWF). The WWF had adopted the Communist Party’s official directive on cultural production which was based on Lenin’s 1917 edict, ‘art is a weapon’(Milner

² ‘Wobblies’ were members of the International Workers of the World, an organisation founded in Chicago in 1905. In terms of worldwide trends the Wobblies were anarcho-syndicalists in that they fused an emotional anarchistic revulsion at organised society with the idea of a giant industrial union emancipating the workers by means of a general strike and seizure of the means of production (Farrell 1981 p.14).

³ In his unpublished manuscript, Reade particularly acknowledges the influence on his intellectual and political life of *The Martyrdom of Man* (Winwood Reade, 1872), which dealt with the four progressive stages of human development: War, Religion, Liberty, and Intellect. William Winwood Reade gave a glimpse of humanity’s future by examining the past. In it he believed science would replace humanity’s dependency on religion, and predicted people would be liberated from labour by three inventions: air travel, a fuel to replace coal and oil, and the production of food in factories. In honour of William Winwood Reade, Tom Reade changed his surname from *Reed* to *Reade*. His book parcel also included, *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin, C., 1859), *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx, K. and Engels, F., 1848), *The Right to be Lazy* (Lafargue, P., 1883), and *Mutual Aid: a factor of evolution* (Kropotkin, P., 1902). Kropotkin had argued in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, that despite the Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest, co-operation was the chief factor in the evolution of the species. The human race became the dominant species because it had the capacity to collaborate. From his understanding of the *Communist Manifesto*, Reade concluded that the logical epitome of collaboration was the commune in which all worked for the common good, and took from the common wealth according to individual needs. The logical extension of communal collaboration was global cooperation as envisaged in the *Martyrdom of Man* (Reade 1998).

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2003,p.20). This exhorted artists to use creativity as a political tool to defend worker's rights. For many artists and intellectuals, casual employment on the wharves gave them flexibility and extra time to devote to interests outside of work. Reade joined the Wharfies' Art Group, a collective whose work integrated cultural endeavours with the industrial and political struggles of the union.

While working as a wharfie, Reade drew cartoons and illustrations for left-wing Australian publications such as the Eureka Youth League's *Challenge*, and *Tribune*, the CPA's national newspaper. Both papers opposed the policies of the Menzies government, which had unsuccessfully sought to outlaw the Communist Party through a referendum in 1951. Reade found in press cartooning a creative form with popular appeal. It enabled him to act as a spokesperson and a working class 'social lever' capable of educating an audience or asserting views counter to the prevailing political mood. This was in contrast with Fine Art, which he rejected because in his view it was elitist and did not connect with the masses. He was unambiguous in his view that the artist was capable of mobilising an audience into action:

I always wanted to be a cartoonist. At the same time I wanted to do something. I thought, well... Art never moved anybody. But you could fire cartoons like bullets in the front line. I used to get a kick out of, you know, up in the coal mines they'd get one of my cartoons and cut it out and stick it up. I used to like that in Cuba too. I'd go around and see my cartoons stuck on doors, all over the island (Gunzburg 1996).

In 1953, Reade also had his own *Challenge* column called *Reade between the Lines*, which he used to express his views and to hone his writing skills. He was awarded a prize judged by the noted Australian left-wing novelist and writer, Frank Hardy, when he entered a *Challenge* short story competition(ASIO, Files 12-13).⁴

Reade's eagerness to critique society and explore new ideas was also stimulated by the activities of the Sydney Push – a congregation of freethinkers who operated from the late 1940s to the 1970s in downtown Sydney pubs. The group espoused an unsentimental approach to life and members were generally atheists, supporters of sexual freedom, and opponents of repressive institutions(Baker 1975). While Reade empathised with the Push's rejection of conformism and critique of authority, he was not amenable to being told what to do and was content to move in and out of the quasi-anarchist circles of the Push (McGuinness 2005).

Throughout the 1950s, the output of the Wharfies' Art Group was stimulated and supported by the Studio of Social Realist Artists (SORA), an artist collective established in Sydney in 1945, to generate a climate sympathetic to radical action in society through creative activity.⁵ Images painted by SORA artists, depicted the conditions of the working-class and were imbued with critical comment on the social circumstances that engendered those conditions. SORA initiated a program of activities supportive of labour ideals and forged direct links with the trade union movement through lectures, art classes, social events and plans for communal art projects. In the 1950s, Reade and other wharfie artists had produced placards, billboards and banners for May Day parades. However, through their association with SORA artists such as Roy Dalgano, Rod

⁴ Reade's piece was titled, *The Needle's Eye*. Hardy praised Reade's work for 'the real excellence of the prose' and stated that he 'would have placed it first if its message had been explicit.'

⁵ For further reading on SORA, see: Merewether, C., *Art and Social Commitment: An End to the City of Dreams 1931-1948*(Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1984); Haese, R., *Modern Australian Art* (New York: Alpine Fine Arts Collection, Ltd., 1982); Smith, B., *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art since 1788* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1945).

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Shaw, Hal Missingham and James and Dora Cant there was a rich cross-fertilisation of information, ideas and energies. From this involvement wharfie artists were encouraged to integrate cultural projects into social comment.

An enduring example of SORA's collaboration with wharfie artists is the Sydney Wharfies' Mural. Initiated by Rod Shaw, the mural was painted between 1953 and 1961 on the walls of the Sydney Waterside Workers' Hall canteen. It illustrates key aspects of Australia's economic and social life and parallel histories of the Australian labour movement, trade unions and the Waterside Workers Federation over a period of almost a century (Reeves 1991-1992). Reade made a major contribution to the mural during the mid to late 50s. A section is on permanent display in the National Maritime Museum.

In 1956, Reade discovered another popular graphic medium - animation. He became involved with an initiative of the small radical film production unit, the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit (WWFFU). The WWFFU operated in Sydney from 1953 to 1958 and made fourteen films that gave voice to the workers' point of view.⁶ Its work stood in opposition to that of the dominant Australian media on several fronts. Technologically, it used rudimentary equipment and 16mm rather than the 35mm format. Institutionally, it maintained a communal working arrangement as opposed to a corporate production structure. Economically, its prime motivation was education rather than profit, and politically, it explored marginal and disenfranchised culture instead of focusing on mainstream life. Many of the Unit's films countered what the union saw as misinformation and anti-worker propaganda (Milner 2003, p.5). As the Unit gained recognition it began to employ a wider range of techniques to communicate to the broader community and to take advantage of new opportunities created by the beginning of television in Australia in 1956.

The Unit made the decision to use animation as a vehicle for public education and devised a series of animated short films, *Land of Australia: Aboriginal Art*. The series' aim was to raise awareness of Aboriginal culture. The choice of subject matter illustrates the Unit's sense of social responsibility and desire to champion issues other than industrial conditions affecting union members. Reade was asked to be involved because of his expertise in graphic and cartooning skills. Although he had no experience in animation he was supportive of the Unit's work and its commitment to social justice. The Unit members had resolved to adapt their filmmaking skills to the process of animation and with Reade's involvement they devised a technique that was quick, effective and cheap to produce. The cinematic narratives for the first two episodes, *Bobra, the kangaroo*, and *Wyamba, the turtle*, were told without using the conventional process of popular animation. The character designs referenced the flat two-dimensional graphic styles of indigenous ancestral spirit images. These were drawn with oil pastels and painted on celluloid sheets. The illusion of movement was achieved by means of optical effects, camera zooms and pans over still images. The Unit's 16mm Bolex camera was mounted on a table sitting on roller skates, which ran on two lengths of angle iron and the artwork was fixed to a sliding aluminium framed window. These simple methods did not require the costly features of theatrical animation (Bannah 2007, pp.72-77).

The third film in the *Land of Australia* series was an animated interpretation of the Australian bush ballad, *Click go the Shears*. This project was a response to the popular 1950s folk revival in Australia. The appeal of folk music for the Left was its support of popular national icons associated with the labour movement.

⁶ In general, the work of the WWFFU was a response to mainstream media's support of the government and shipowners' criticism of wharf labourers' efforts to improve their working conditions. For an understanding of the social and political contexts for the establishment of the WWFFU see Lisa Milner's *Fighting Films* pp.9-19.

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On its release in 1957, the *Land of Australia* series was screened to both national and international audiences in a variety of locations.⁷ However, after unsuccessful attempts to find a distributor for the series, the Unit reconsidered the notion of extending its work to a wider audience and no further animation projects were pursued. Despite this outcome, the project convinced Reade that animation was, indeed, a mass medium with the potential to service the needs of education, social comment and change.

In 1960, Fidel Castro sought the support of international unions to overcome problems facing the Cuban Revolution. Inspired by the ideal of an international movement of solidarity, Reade was stirred into action. In early 1961, armed with introductions provided by several left-wing trade unions, he went to Cuba to participate in its revolutionary transformation from capitalism to communism (ASIO, File 39). He took with him the imprint of the general hardship he had experienced on the road with his father. His working class background and self-education had shaped him as a resourceful person who could go it alone. He had an anarchist streak and he didn't fear authority. He had experience in the creative skills of writing, painting, cartooning and animation, and through cultural activity supported by the WWF he had learnt to adapt and integrate his political views into cultural expression (Bannah 2007, p.87).

When he arrived in Cuba on 23 February 1961, Reade volunteered his creative skills to the service of the Revolution and was offered work as a cartoonist for the Cuban Communist Party's newspaper, *Hoy*. He enlisted in the Brigada Internacional, a militia unit comprised of foreign volunteers, and supported Castro's army at the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion by USA backed forces. Following this incident, Reade participated in the mass mobilisation of 280,000 volunteer workers who helped teach Cuban peasants how to read and write during the 1961 National Literacy Campaign (Campaña de Alfabetización).

For Reade, 1961 was an extremely active year. He drew editorial cartoons for *Hoy*, became a children's book illustrator for the publishing house, Editorial Gente Nueva (Publishing New People), did cartoons for the youth magazine *Pionero* and the satirical paper *Palante y Palante*, and designed and made puppets for the newly created National children's theatre, Guíñol Infantil De Cuba, in Havana (Padrón 2004). In addition, he wrote articles on the Revolution for *Tribune* and the Eureka Youth League newspaper, *Challenge*, in Australia.

The growing success of the newly formed State film institute, ICAIC, as 'a tool of the Revolution' also appealed to Reade. Late in 1961, he presented himself to ICAIC and screened his 16mm copy of *Land of Australia: Aboriginal Art*. He stressed his support for the organisation's commitment to public service and its spirit of social concern, and offered his creative skills to the service of ICAIC. The institute offered him a position as a writer and director of animated films (Henriquez 2006). Reade accepted the role and submitted the storyboard concept, *La Cosa* (*The Thing*), which ICAIC produced in 1962.

La Cosa is a Marxist parable about the world created by capitalism and the society it sustains. It illustrates how human beings can organise the production of the means for their own subsistence. Passing figures representing social institutions of commerce, science, clergy and the military assess the value of a lively bean-like 'thing'. None can find a use for it. A peasant boy recognises its value. He plants it, nurtures it, and the 'thing' grows into a tree bearing fruit. The themes of *La Cosa* make the audience aware that modern industrial society, as argued by Marx in

⁷ *Land of Australia: Aboriginal Art* was screened at the 1957 Sydney Film Festival, the Sydney Film Society and the Sydney University Film Group. Copies of the film were purchased by the Visual Education Centres in Sydney for use in NSW schools. It was also shown at the Tenth Jubilee International Film Festival in Czechoslovakia and at the 1957 Edinburgh Film Festival.

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Das Kapital, had changed the relationship between humankind and the world. Under capitalism, Marx contended that where everything is a product for sale, human lives, relationships and values become products with exchange values. This leads to dehumanisation and workers, who are incorporated into the machinery of production, are alienated from the product of their labour. With *La Cosa*, Reade adopts Marx's method of seeking a more discerning way of seeing the realities of life. Thus the intention of the film is didactic. The organic bean 'thing', in *La Cosa*, is linked to common sense and the removal of an alienating element or gulf that estranges man from nature. For a society embracing the principles of Marxism-Leninism, the film gave public voice to debates confronting Cuba's social transformation.

La Cosa received Cuba's first international award for animation at the 1963 London Film Festival. The honour was a genuine boost for Cuban films and vindication of the establishment of an animation studio within ICAIC. International recognition of this kind helped to promote a positive image of the Revolution abroad. Not that ICAIC sought foreign approval. On the contrary, its guiding principle was that foreign recognition would follow if the films were authentic expressions of the Revolution's own needs (Chanan 2004, p.131).

Following the international success of *La Cosa*, Reade continued to write and direct animated projects with an emphasis on didactic content. He joined the department of the Instituto Cubano de Radiodifusion, ICR (TV), as an animation director. His first project accepted for production by ICR (TV) was *Viva papi!* (Long live Daddy!, 1963) - the tale of a boy who wishes that his father had a more important job than just making nuts and bolts. He dreams of his father working as a locomotive driver, or as a pilot flying a plane, or as a knight in metal armour. He learns, however, that if there were no nuts and bolts, the locomotive, the plane, and the armour would fall apart. This realisation makes him appreciate that his father's seemingly insignificant labour advances the work and well-being of others.

For the production of this film, Reade was assigned a 16 year old animation assistant, Juan Padrón. While Reade could be fiercely judgemental and confronting, he did recognise and nurture raw talent, and boosted confidence in those he supported. His personal charisma made a huge impact on the young Padrón who would later become Cuba's foremost animator/humorist. Padrón acknowledges Reade's influence on his career:

He was a guru for us... He taught me a lot about scriptwriting and the need to work hard in improving my drawings; to study classic novels and films; that culture is also learning to do things with your hands; to learn from the farmers and very poor people; to learn to call trees by their [given] names. He was like a big brother or a father to me... he wanted to teach me to be the best (Padrón 2006).

It is interesting to note that in 1975 Cuba's second international prize for animation was awarded to Padrón, twelve years after Reade's award for *La Cosa*. Padrón's short animated film, *La Silla* (The Chair, 1974), won a prize at the International Festival of Cinema for Children at Girón, Spain.⁸ Both films have an educational purpose and comment on how humans interact with their world. In 1982, Padrón found a deteriorating 16mm print of *Viva papi!*. In his view, the film was in poor condition and he feared that it could be lost to posterity. As a tribute to the strength of Reade's original concept and the musical soundtrack featuring one of Cuba's most

⁸ *La Silla* focuses on the history of chairs and isolates the *school chair* as being the most important of all. This is because the school chair facilitates education, which in turn supports human development.


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popular singers, Bola de Nieve, he remade the film ‘changing details here and there’(Padrón 2006). In 1989, *Viva papi!* was selected by the Cultural Council of the Cuban Institute of Cinema as one of its thirty best animated films.

In an attempt to encourage viewers to become participants in the Revolution, Reade and ICAIC colleague, documentary director Harry Tanner, developed an animated series with the popular animated cartoon character, *Pepe*, who addressed day to day predicaments faced by Cubans. The character provided comic relief to subject matter associated with agriculture, civic responsibility, and health.⁹ Cubans responded positively to the *Pepe* series because for the first time ‘they could watch a cigar smoking mulato Cuban character in animation doing the same things and solving the same problems as themselves’ (Padrón 2004).

By 1969, Reade’s interest in the direct didactic approach of short animation projects began to wane. He felt a greater need to refine his writing skills, which in his view offered greater scope for dealing with complex issues (Tanner 2006). In 1970, he abandoned any further involvement with animation and returned to Australia where he worked as a journalist with the *Sunday Australian*, wrote plays and illustrated books he had written for children.¹⁰

On 7 May 1998, Harry Reade died on Nugra Farm near Girvan, New South Wales. He had requested that one half of his cremated remains be sprinkled around an apple tree on the farm, and the remainder in the Ethel and Julius Rosenberg Memorial Park in Havana. Documentary filmmaker David Bradbury delivered the remains to Cuba (Bradbury 2002). In a moving sub-text in his film, *Fond Memories of Cuba*, Bradbury recorded Juan Padrón, Reade’s former animation assistant, scattering them in the park to the tune of *Waltzing Matilda* played by Cuban saxophonist, Francisco Sanchez.

The spreading of Reade’s ashes signified much about a person who had invested a great deal of his creative energies in two ideologically opposed communities. His beliefs about the value of art for the working class were not reached by accident, but by taking part in class struggles with the communities in which he lived. While he had limited response to his creative efforts in Australia he found in Cuba a more dynamic ideological framework, a critical mass of fellow conspirators, and a society receptive to the mission of the socialist animation script writer. The basic set of interests that informed his work was set by his Australian experience. The politically heated environment of Cuba, however, allowed him to fulfil his ambition to use art as an agent of revolutionary social change. 

Max Bannah lives in Brisbane, Australia, where he works as an animator producing illustrations and cartoon graphics, television commercials, and short films. He teaches Animation History and Practice, and Drawing for Animation at the Queensland University of Technology where he completed his Master’s thesis, ‘A cause for animation: Harry Reade and the Cuban Revolution’. This paper was accepted for the 21st Annual Society for Animation Studies conference.

⁹ Titles in the series include: *Pepe Trinchera (Pepe the Trench-maker)*, 1968; *Pepe cafetómano (Pepe the Coffee maker)*, 1968; *Pepe Esparadrappo (Pepe First Aid)*, 1969; *Pepe Voluntario (Pepe the volunteer)*, 1969.

¹⁰ Children’s books by Reade: Reade, H. 1984. *Whitefellers are like Traffic Lights*. Perth: Artlook Books. Reade, H. 1987. *How Many Ropes on a Boat? Frenchs Forest: Little Lilyfield*. Plays include: Reade, H. 1981. *The Execution of Steele Rudd*. University of Queensland, Fryer Library, Brisbane; Reade, H. 1982. *Buck’s night at Susy’s Place*. Montmorency, Vic.; Reade, H. 1982. *The Naked Gun*. Montmorency, Vic.: Yackandandah Playscripts.

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