

PLOD ESSAY:

Matthew John McMahon: Union leader, 'Co-operator' by S.Gatto

A few years ago I came across this simple obituary in the October 9, 1942 edition of the *Powlett Express*:

'Mr. Matthew John McMahon, retired miner, aged 67 years died in the Wonthaggi Hospital on Monday last. Father Murtagh of the Catholic Church performed the burial service, the remains being interred in the Catholic Portion of the Wonthaggi Cemetery. The late Mr McMahon leaves a wife, Ethel, and seven children – Thomas, Gladys, Sheila (Mrs

Zotti) John, Allan, Leo and Bert. The Funeral arrangements were carried out by John D. Keady.'

I knew something of McMahon and searched in vain in the rest of the paper and in other *Express* editions immediately before and after his death for a more in-depth account of his life. I knew that he had played a major role in the social and political life of the town in its formative years, especially in the setting up of the extensive social welfare system that, in my opinion, is the outstanding feature of Wonthaggi's rich history. I wondered why he had not been considered worthy of a more elaborate obituary by the *Powlett Express* editor. Had he already been forgotten? Had he become irrelevant or worse a 'persona non grata'? Had the *Sentinel* editor treated him likewise?

Two years later, I was able to find the *Sentinel* obituary in the State Library. It in part stated: 'One of Wonthaggi's most public-spirited men in the person of Mr Matthew John McMahon passed away at the Wonthaggi Hospital on October 6th after a long illness.'

'He led a notable public life, having been Mayor of Wonthaggi, President of the Miners' Union, President of the Wonthaggi Hospital, President of the Co-operative Store and a member of the committee of the



Workmen's Club. He also acted as starter in all union sports and picnics for many years.

'Mr McMahon was one of the 50 Rutherglen miners brought to Wonthaggi by the late Mr Dodwell Brown to commence operations at the State Mine 33 years ago.

'He was one of the men who called the first meetings to establish the Co-operative Store and the Workmen's Club.'

M.J. McMahon was born at Taradale, a small town on the Victorian goldfields, near Castlemaine, in 1875. He was the fifth of six children born to Thomas McMahon and Margaret Slattery. Matt's father was one of the thousands of Irish men who flocked to the goldfields in the 1850s. Matt grew up on the goldfields and followed his father into gold mining. By the end of the 19th Century the romantic period of goldmining on the Victorian fields was well and truly over. Most gold miners were manual labourers struggling to earn a living wage.

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century the twenty-five-year-old Matthew John McMahon, married to Ethel May Cooper, was living and working as a gold miner in Rutherglen. They had two children, only one of whom survived.

When in November 1909 the Victorian government was recruiting miners to open up the Powlett River coalfields, there was a ready source of miners in Rutherglen, where 300 men were unemployed due to the closure of the Prentice and Southern gold mine caused in part by industrial troubles. When the miners appealed to the Minister for Mines to intervene in the dispute, they were offered employment at the recently established State Coal Mine. McMahon was one of the first to sign up. A new life based on the promise of secure employment and a more just working environment in keeping with his social and political ideas beckoned.

When Matt was growing up the spirit of Eureka was still very much alive on the gold fields and progressive left-wing ideas were prominent among the miners. The defeat of the labour strikes of the 1890's led not only to the birth of the Labor Party but also to a more organized labour movement at the grassroots level. McMahon was politically involved in Rutherglen. Among the miners that Matthew John McMahon lived and worked with was the future first Labour Prime Minister of New Zealand, Michael Savage. Though not a radical, McMahon believed in socialism. He also believed in the workers taking the initiative to establish co-operative institutions as a means of bettering the lot of the working classes. When he left to come to Wonthaggi McMahon was a member of the Committee of the pioneer Rutherglen Co-operative Bakery, which, despite the name, also included a grocery store. Mr H. Nichols, who also came to Wonthaggi, was a fellow member of the committee.

That the miners who came to Powlett River had progressive ideas was soon demonstrated when on December 12th 1909 at a mass meeting, less than a fortnight after arriving on the coalfield, McMahon played a leading role in forming the Powlett River Medical and Accident Relief Fund. He was elected the inaugural vice-president. McMahon was a union man and soon became involved in union affairs. He became vice-president of the Vigilance Committee and then the first president of the Powlett River branch of the Victorian Coal Miners Association. As a member of the union movement he was also elected to the Wonthaggi Progress Association early in 1910 and worked tirelessly in the hospital movement making sure, with the help of other progressives, that the hospital would be run on co-operative lines once the hospital was built

by the government. He was a strong driving force in the hospital movement, and with his powers of persuasion and force of character, he helped the community to convince the Victorian government to maintain its promise to build the hospital.

Too much of a realist to believe that Wonthaggi could become a 'temperance town', McMahon supported the idea of the establishment of a State Hotel as a remedy to the proliferation of Four Gallon licences and the problem of drunkenness in the town. When it was obvious that a State Hotel would not eventuate, McMahon supported the idea of a Municipal Hotel. Since this too soon became unlikely, McMahon became part of the movement that established the Wonthaggi Workmen's Co-operative Club. When the first committee of the club, under the presidency of T.J. O'Brien, ran into difficulties, McMahon, already heavily involved in the controversies that threatened to split the hospital movement, in dealing with industrial problems at the State Mine, and in the massive problems that faced the newly formed Borough Council, heeded the call and was duly elected Vice-president. In 1912 he was elected the second President of the committee, a position he held until 1915.

In 1912 McMahon was still president of the Miners' Union and played a leading part in the negotiation with Management on a series of issues. In the course of 1912 he was offered the position of the Wonthaggi agent for the Nobel brand of explosives to be sold to contract miners, which he accepted. As a consequence he resigned as president of the Union. However, as the *Sentinel* reporter commented, he retained his membership in the Union 'which can ill afford to lose unionists of his stamp and force of character. He is regarded by his comrades as one of the straightest and most enthusiastic unionists on the field.' The *Express* reporter also commented that, 'considerable regret was expressed' when he resigned and describes him as 'an indefatigable worker' who had 'the interests of the Association at heart. He has the grit and sound judgement which makes for a good executive officer'. Although he never again held an executive position he remained a union member all his life.

(To be continued)

