

PLOD ESSAY:

Matthew John McMahon (continued) by S. Gatto

When news broke in June 1910 that the State government was preparing legislation to grant 'self-government' to the nascent state model township of Wonthaggi, McMahon and most of the Wonthaggi Progress Association was contrary to the formation of a Borough Council. They argued that, among other reasons, the local community was not ready for such a move and that the State Government would not fully deliver on

its promise to establish the town along model town principles by creating the necessary infrastructure once a Borough Council was set up. Their protests were in vain. In 1911, McMahon was among the 11 Political Labour Council members elected to the first Borough Council. He served until 1917 and was mayor during the very difficult years of World War 1.

Perhaps the most important contribution made by M.J. McMahon to the Wonthaggi community was his role in the establishment of the Wonthaggi Co-operative Distribution Society. A product of the co-operative movement on the goldfields, he and other like-minded reformers set out to establish a 'Co-op' here. He and other 'Co-operators' called the necessary meetings, walked from house to house gathering the necessary number of members and capital, wrote the constitution based on the Rochdale Principles, and then took the necessary legal steps to set up the institution. By 1912 the humble store in Watt Street was established. In spite of scepticism and derision that such an institution could work, after the initial difficulties, the 'Co-op' began to prosper. It soon outgrew its premises in Watt Street and the premises on the south side of Graham Street were bought in 1916 and rebuilt. In 1918 the Graham Street store was



The First Union Committee

M.J. McMahon in in the second row. third from left.

opened. By 1920 the Co-op had become a "universal provider. From the beginning of 1912 until 1921 M.J. McMahon (agent) was president of the 'Co-op' committee of management and ran it along the Rochdale principles, which he thoroughly believed in. By the time he retired the Co-op" was an established Wonthaggi institution ready to embark on its next phase of development and growth.

In 1915 the social welfare system set up by the Union and the Friendly Societies in the town included medical cover, hospital cover, a Workmen's Co-operative Cub, a Co-operative Distribution Society and a Union Band. Other businesses and institutions in the town also provided services to members of these organizations at reduced rates including the town chemists and the dentists. At a stop-work meeting in 1915 the proposal to set up a co-operative dispensary was made. Nothing was done until after the war. By 1921 a shop in Graham Street next door to the Co-op had been bought for a dispensary. Once again amid scepticism, the Dispensary began trading in 1922. The trustees of the Wonthaggi Medical Fund Dispensary, as it was initially

called were Messrs H. Carroll, J.E. Goldsmith, and M.J. McMahon. Although I have not yet come across any evidence, I cannot imagine that McMahon was not also involved in the movement that built the Wonthaggi Union Theatre in 1924.

McMahon was a firm believer in democracy and in socialism, but above all he was a passionate 'Co-operator'. He was a man with a strong will who stood by his principles but he was also a pragmatist, who in time mastered the art of compromise. He did not suffer fools gladly and he did not pull any punches when he thought the occasion warranted it. It is inevitable that such a man, with so much power, who was so much in the public eye, would make enemies in the volatile early years of Wonthaggi's history. His running battles with his adversary from the right, W.E. Easton make interesting reading. Though a political adversary, Easton was not one of his enemies. McMahon's enemies would come from erstwhile supporters. In 1918 McMahon suffered a humiliating defeat when, as the retiring mayor, he was not re-elected to the Wonthaggi Borough Council. The left wing of the Union had withdrawn its support and actively campaigned against him accusing him of turning his back on the working class. McMahon was Mayor when World War 1 broke out and he, contrary to expectations of some, came out in support of the war and Australia's participation in it. When the conscription question split the town in 1916, McMahon, the Irish Catholic Union man supported conscription and he campaigned for it. As well as this McMahon, who in his early years had championed the principle that no man should be dismissed without an inquiry being first held to decide on the justice of the dismissal, supported the Town Clerk's dismissal of a council worker and did not support the demand for an inquiry. Among other criticisms levied against him by the left was also the fact that as Mayor in 1918 he did not vote in favour of making the newly acquired Town Hall available to the public (including the Union) free of charge.

In the *Powlett Express* obituary McMahon is described as a 'miner'. His working life started

and ended as a miner. He remained an agent for the Nobel explosives until 1920. When many miners started obtaining their explosives from the State Mine Store, his business was no longer viable. Although as President of the Co-op, he was paid an allowance, this clearly was not sufficient for him and his large family (7 children) to live on and so he returned to work in the State Mine as a 'Deputy', according to the official State Mine records, as a 'shiftman' (maintenance man) according to the Co-op annual reports. In 1925 the brief note in the Union records in our archives simply state 'Sick off for good'. His hectic public life had clearly impacted on his health. According State Mine records he returned to work in the mine in 1933 and retired on 20th February 1935, at the age of 60, the retiring age for miners.

When in 1931, 21 years after its foundation, the Wonthaggi and District Hospital 'came of age', M.J. McMahon was convinced to rejoin the committee that he had served so well for so long when the hospital was established. He was honoured by being elected President. In 1933, when the Wonthaggi Co-operative Distribution Society celebrated its 'twenty-first', the commemorative photograph that now hangs partly hidden on one of our museum walls was taken. M.J. McMahon, though not a member of the committee, was invited to be part of it. Clearly he was still honoured and respected by the Wonthaggi community he had served so well. Whether the *Powlett Express* obituary is a sign that the radicalised Union movement of the late nineteen thirties and early forties considered him a 'persona non grata' because he did not share their revolutionary ideology or perhaps he had taken an unpopular stance on the Second World War or any other issue, I do not know. There is much about Matt McMahon that I do not know. What I do know is that there is not even a blade of grass named in his honour in the town that he so tirelessly served. It's time this was changed.



M.J. McMahon is in the front row, second from left.