

## Correspondence

IN THE October 1983 issue of the *New Zealand Journal of History*, Dr Erik Olssen reviews a book of mine, *The Red and the Gold: an Informal History of the Waihi Strike*.

Dr Olssen dislikes the book thoroughly. Out of sympathy with my kind of interest in the past — an exploration of what the world looked, sounded and smelled like at a certain time and place, and what it felt like to be involved in certain events — he disapproves of the choices I have made, of what I have included and what I have left out.

This is legitimate criticism. But Dr Olssen goes further: he accuses me of historical inaccuracies and he invents mis-statements and then attributes them to me.

I hope you will allow me space in your journal to refute some of these charges that have been made against me and published in this periodical.

Among the list of errors I am alleged to have made are these:

1. Dr Olssen charges me with claiming 'that Tim Armstrong was virtually a "Red Fed" from birth', and failing to grasp that he was Tom Newth's lieutenant. All the material I have used on Armstrong's life and opinions comes from the detailed autobiographical letter that he wrote from Lyttelton gaol in 1917. Most of the material I have used is quoted directly. This moving letter traces Tim Armstrong's life from his days as a bewildered child labourer trying to make sense of harsh conditions, through the slow evolution of his political thought to his emergence as an active unionist at Waihi. Above all the letter shows Armstrong as a man who thought for himself. I believe his independence of mind comes out strongly in *The Red and the Gold*.

As for failing to grasp that he was Tom Newth's lieutenant, I make that clear on page 33 with the first mention of Armstrong. I also make it clear that their political views diverged by quoting statements directly from each of them and giving my sources.

2. Nor was Charles Opie a member of the Union executive in 1908, says Dr Olssen in his list of charges against me.

The implication is that I have claimed that Opie was a member of the executive. But I have not. I have said that he was a member of the delegation from the Union that met the Mine Management in 1908. There, as elsewhere, I have named my source in a note at the back of the book.

3. 'For Roche "Red Feds" and their enemies battled in Waihi from 1901 to 1912, (although there were no "Red Feds" in New Zealand before 1908)', writes Dr Olssen.

This statement makes me wonder whether, in fact, he has read the book. In Chapters 3 and 4 of *The Red and the Gold* I trace the spread of activist ideas in the coal-mining settlements of the South Island during the year 1908, and I

make it clear that the more conservative Waihi miners were little affected until 1909.

On page 60 I record the first use of the term 'Red Fed' — not as Dr Olssen suggests in 1908 but, according to Pat Hickey, in 1912. Obviously I do not use the term for any action or person before that date.

4. Dr Olssen accuses me of sliding 'round the important question of the Federation Executives' attitude to the strike although it is clear that Parry did not have the support he claimed to possess and that a majority were angry that a strike had been called'.

It is not clear and it never has been clear what support there was in the Executive for the strike — the question was debated on and off in the press for weeks.

Both Bill Parry and Peter Fraser insisted in the *Maoriland Worker* that approval had been sought and gained. The *Auckland Star*, quoting anonymous sources, thought otherwise.

I tried as economically as possible to express both points of view. What I wrote was: 'He (Parry) also told them [the Waihi miners] that the union had the sanction of the Federation of Labour to proclaim a strike. Bill Parry perhaps believed what he wanted to believe. It seems the Federation were not nearly so unequivocal.' (*The Red and the Gold*, page 61.) I then refer the reader in a note to press statements on both sides of the controversy.

5. Dr Olssen accuses me of treating the practice of 'following-up' as a lark. I describe the practice on page 82, making use of the police statement that the man followed was sometimes jostled but never physically harmed, but I add that for the victim it was the stuff of nightmares. I do not think this is treating the matter as a lark.

Dr Olssen is cross because I say that men like Parry never 'followed-up' in their lives.

If Dr Olssen is familiar with the Waihi material he must know that both Parry and McLennon were desperately anxious to keep the strike legal and non-violent. I assume they took no part in 'following-up' for several reasons: they were not arrested for it at the time the police swooped on the leaders. Had they been there I do not think the police would have missed the opportunity to take them into custody. They both believed that they could and should win the strike by persuading the strike-breakers and the blacklegs to their side. This is clear from the evidence they gave in court when they were arrested. When I was writing the book I carefully compared dates and times and, as far as I could work it out, Parry was not in Waihi when the main rash of following-up occurred. He was in Waikino trying to persuade the battery workers away from the site.

The difference between the principles and the methods of the strike leaders and those of the run of the mill strikers is most marked in the Waihi material. When Bill Parry and McLennon were imprisoned and their influence removed the strikers became a far more unruly lot.

Dr Olssen's final accusation concerns my description of Frederick George Evans: 'Without ever making clear her sources she also prepares for the tragic climax by portraying Evans as "a quiet and unassuming man", almost scholarly, and claims that the police believed that "If only more of the strikers were like him the trouble would be cleared up in no time"' (page 102). If that had been true it is impossible to explain why the Federation did not make more of the fact after his death. Indeed, as Maurice Shadbolt once said to me the silence about Evans'

character is almost resounding.' I am not sure what Maurice Shadbolt is doing there: perhaps he is considered by Dr Olssen to be the voice of revealed truth.

I do make clear my source for the phrase 'a quiet and unassuming man'. I refer in a note to an obituary of Evans published first by the *Otago Daily Times* from their Auckland correspondent. The *New Zealand Herald's* description of him was that he was 'a young steady man' (13 November 1912). 'He [Evans] was known to his fellows and even to the police authorities as a quiet unassuming man. He it was who consulted the inspector of police as to just what procedure would be considered reasonable as peaceful picketing and his manner made a favourable impression on the officer.' His manner also made a favourable impression on the magistrate before whom he was charged and found guilty of using insulting language to strikebreakers. Evans was one of the few strikers that the magistrate did not attempt to bind over with a surety.

(This letter was written by the late Mrs Stanley Roche shortly before her death. The draft was slightly revised by a friend.)

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