

Ragnar Redbeard: The Antipodean origins of radical fabulist Arthur Desmond

By Mark Derby

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Reviewed by Jared Davidson

The radicalism of Arthur Desmond, let alone his biographical details and life experience, is hard to pin down. I first came across this red-bearded poet and firebrand when writing *Sewing Freedom: Philip Josephs, Transnationalism & Early New Zealand Anarchism*.¹ Was Desmond an anarchist? His denouncement of wealthy sheep owners as bloodsucking leeches, bankers as scoundrels, and the press as hirelings of monopoly, jumped out of the 1880s as a striking example of anti-capitalist thought. His involvement in the 1890 Maritime Strike also seemed to tick the right boxes. Yet something about Desmond and his politics did not fit. He certainly sat outside of the framework I had used for *Sewing Freedom*, namely those who advocated mass anarchism in the collectivist or communist tradition. In the end, Desmond merited a passing mention, but the essence of his radicalism remained elusive.

Mark Derby has done a superb job in detailing the life and politics of Arthur Desmond in this slim but stellar book; what Derby calls ‘a brief, provisional essay’ of ‘ideology gone rancid’ (7). It is even more remarkable considering Desmond himself ‘laid a complex trail of false identities, misleading hints and outrageous falsehoods’ (11). With scant facts to go on, Derby skilfully unearths a biographical narrative that takes the reader from 1880s Hawke’s Bay to Sydney, Australia, and finally to Chicago, where Desmond published what would become his most influential text, *Survival of the Fittest or the Philosophy of Power* in 1896, later republished as *Might is Right* under the pseudonym Ragnar Redbeard. *Might is Right* is celebrated by white supremacists across the globe, and Derby’s account of Desmond’s radicalism logically culminates with *Might is Right*, although as the essay shows, tenets of Desmond’s egotistical and individualistic thought are visible throughout his earlier writing.

At 68 pages in length, *Ragnar Redbeard* speeds enjoyably through the little information that exists on Desmond’s life. In the opening chapter, Derby introduces us to Desmond at a hui in the Poverty Bay settlement of Te Karaka, where plans to welcome the aged guerrilla Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Tūruki are afoot. As Pākehā settlers in the area form vigilante groups to meet the perceived threat, Desmond bravely defends the local Māori community and the past deeds of Te Kooti, claiming that the real cause of Pākehā fear was the potential halt of land sales in the district. Expressing his unpopular and radical views before a crowd of 800, Desmond was hauled off the stage by an angry mob and lucky to escape unscathed.

We also learn of Desmond’s ability with the pen—the one constant that runs throughout his life. It is in defence of Te Kooti’s visit that Desmond writes *The Song of Te Kooti*, said to be a loose translation of a traditional Māori chant but something Desmond probably composed himself. An Appendix reproduces the poem in full, a remarkable but culturally problematic text that fiercely admonishes the taking of Māori land while simultaneously taking the voice of an Māori narrator. Indeed, it would not be the last time Desmond wilfully claimed the words of others as his own.

Chapter Two goes back in time to explore what is known of Desmond’s life prior to 1889. Most likely to have been of Irish heritage, Desmond was a low-paid and itinerant farm labourer, one of those forgotten workers of the New Zealand labour movement.² His experience of inadequate working conditions and the oligarchy of sheep estate owners no doubt influenced his progressive tax theories, support of women’s suffrage, and critique of the privileged few. Derby also explores Desmond the autodidact, who appears to have fed himself on a steady diet of poets like Shelly, Burns, and Goldsmith; and highlights Desmond’s campaign for political office in 1884 and 1887 as a candidate for the small settler and workingman.

By the time of the 1890 Maritime Strike, Desmond is in Auckland, organising gum diggers and timber mill workers, making a name in labour circles, and planting incendiary placards across the city demonising the banks. Occupying an empty office in the centre of Queen Street, Desmond published the vociferous labour newspaper *Tribune* before being thrown out by the landlord, who was unimpressed with such a radical squatter in his midst. Yet as Derby explains in Chapter Three, this was the beginning of the end for Desmond, at least in New Zealand, for accusations of plagiarism and unscrupulous dealings were mounting. Sued for libel by a prominent MP and shunned by moderate labour leaders, Desmond left for Wellington before crossing the Tasman to Sydney.

Chapter Four explores Desmond's deep involvement in the radical, working-class culture based around Castlereagh Street, the home of groups like the Active Service Brigade and the Australian Socialist League. Here Desmond's writing and poetry found a ready audience, influencing figures such as future New South Wales Premier Jack Lang, and the writer Henry Lawson. But amongst his defence of the unemployed and oppressed are ugly strands of anti-Semitism and a violent individualism that first appeared during his political campaign in Hawke's Bay. For Derby, the Desmond of Sydney had renounced utopian socialism for a peculiarly despotic form of anarchism, influenced by the thinking of Nietzsche or Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own*.

The threads of Desmond's colourful politics are weaved throughout the essay, and are finally laid out for all in *Might is Right*, the focus of Chapter Five and the final chapter of the book. Derby rightly describes *Might is Right* as a 'barely readable cascade of bile... as though dictated at speed from the bottom of a whisky bottle' (51-2). Racist, misogynist, and full of praise for totalitarianism, *Might is Right* quickly became the catch cry of reactionary movements (recently dubbed the 'alt-right') and the inspiration for such texts as the *Satanic Bible*. For Derby, it is Desmond's sole surviving legacy, despite his earlier efforts in defence of the working-class and tangata whenua of New Zealand.

Some might differ with Derby is his linking of Desmond with anarchist individualism and those who moved 'so far to the left that they dropped off the edge' (54). Certainly anarchist individualism and proponents of 'propaganda of the deed' believed fervently in the sovereignty of the individual and advocated violence as a means of sparking collective revolt. But they should not be confused with those like Desmond, whose politics align closer with fascism and the libertarian right—although the confused and developing nature of Desmond's radicalism makes tracing a particular lineage difficult.

A longer book might have allowed for such lineages to be explored more fully, and for Desmond's views to be put into a broader national and international context. But as a provisional essay, Derby's account does an impressive job in charting Desmond's radical muckraking, despite the patchy sources and deliberate muddying of the biographical narrative by Desmond himself. Riveting and well researched, *Ragnar Redbeard* shines new light on a unique and under-studied figure of New Zealand's radical past.

¹ Jared Davidson, *Sewing Freedom: Philip Josephs, Transnationalism & Early New Zealand Anarchism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2013). Desmond was mentioned in Frank Pebble's classic pamphlet 'Troublemakers' *Anarchism and Syndicalism: The Early Years of the Libertarian Movement in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (Libertarian Press, 1995). Derby also explores the politics of Desmond in 'Mahuki of the Red Plume: the intersection of labour and race politics in 1890', a paper delivered at Globalisation and Labour in the Pacific: Re-evaluating the 1890 Maritime Strike, November 2010.

² John E. Martin, *The Forgotten Worker: The Rural Wage Earner in Nineteenth-century New Zealand* (Wellington: Allen & Unwin/ Bridget Williams Books, 1990).