

## John A. Lee, 1891 – 1982

*James Smithies*

John A. Lee stood squarely at the intersection between literature and politics, although it is clear that he owed his strongest allegiance to the latter. For Lee, literature was the most efficient means by which he could connect with a broad cross-section of the New Zealand public and press his social vision to both the working-classes and the middle-class supporters of the Labour party who were demanding a less radical version of the welfare state than he entertained. A producer of voluminous quantities of prose, and a noted orator, Lee came to intellectual maturity between 1914 and 1945, when New Zealand culture was confronted with the harsh realities of global conflict and political unrest, and although it would be inaccurate to suggest that he gained mastery over either of his chosen fields, he remains one of the most important literary and political figures of early twentieth-century New Zealand.

Lee is chiefly remembered for his effectiveness as a public speaker, his physical appearance (he lost an arm during World War One), his role in the election of the First Labour government under Michael Joseph Savage in 1935, and his subsequent expulsion from the party during World War Two. But his contribution to New Zealand culture and literature was much broader than this. Lee was the face of radical New Zealand politics for several decades and a rare example of a New Zealand intellectual willing to import global trends like Syndicalism, Fabianism and Socialism into his frequently repressive provincial culture. Although never particularly gifted or original as a writer, his efforts as a pamphleteer, orator and novelist and his ability to tap into the values and desires of working-class New Zealand made him something of a folk hero in his own time.

John Alexander Lee was a part of the first generation of New Zealanders to grow up within a modern nation state. A year before he was born, the Liberal party (1890–1912) came to power under Richard Seddon, ushering in several decades of social reform and the eventual closing of the colonial frontier. Although state control remained rudimentary in some areas of life until after World War One, New Zealand was quickly establishing a reputation as a 'social laboratory,' free from the influence of tradition that hampered Europe, where tangible social reform was possible and government intervention was of a beneficent nature. Ironically, these developments were coterminous with a rapidly expanding working-class, who were often subjected to long working

hours and appalling conditions. As the twentieth century approached, it became clear that nineteenth-century liberal reform did little to ease the plight of these lower-class workers, and (in combination with the importation of unionist ideas from Australia) a Labour movement began. When Lee entered politics he immediately cast himself as the working-class hero, complete with a poverty-stricken childhood in nineteenth-century New Zealand to enhance his case, but it is uncertain whether he really did suffer as much as his writing suggests. Literary critics and historians regard him as an inveterate self-publicist, and it is unlikely that many of the stories he circulated about himself were strictly true.

However, there can be no doubt that Lee grew up during a period where state involvement in everyday life was limited, and that life could be extremely difficult for those near the bottom rung of society. He was born on 31 October 1891, to Alfred Lee and Mary Isabella Taylor. His biographer, Erik Olssen, relates how Lee's early years were characterized by an extreme level of insecurity. His mother and father never actually married, and Lee was born in North Dunedin, where his mother had fled with her one-year old daughter. Lee's father moved back in with them briefly, but left permanently when Mary's parents moved in (along with her sister and two brothers). If Lee's own accounts are to be believed, the family lived in abject poverty for many years, supplemented by charitable aid and his mother's meagre income as a dressmaker. In 1896, Mary Taylor collapsed under the strain and Lee was relocated to Gore to live with his sometimes violently drunk grandmother. In 1899 his mother was well enough to reclaim her children, and the family returned to Dunedin, where Lee began a life of childhood criminal activity.

Lee's criminal activity must be placed within the context of both his family's financial situation and the often repressive judicial conditions of early twentieth-century New Zealand. By 1905 his (now reformed) grandmother came to stay with the family in Dunedin, but his mother was still working extremely hard, and often not getting home until midnight. With the lack of social legislation characteristic of the period this is not altogether surprising, and undoubtedly affected Lee's later demands for greater welfare provisions in New Zealand, but Lee was left unsupervised and began stealing firewood and coal before graduating to truancy and theft from industrial sites. In 1906 he was caught stealing brass patterns worth £20 from a factory and was, as Erik Olssen records, 'convicted and ordered to be privately whipped with 12 strokes of a birch rod.' Later that same year he was caught attempting to steal tools from another factory and was sentenced to the Burnham Industrial School, where he could aspire to either being boarded out to a family, placed

in service, or discharged after a requisite period of good behaviour. After performing well and becoming a trusted member of the school he attempted to escape, twice, and effectively became an outlaw, joining groups of men on the swag and gaining a degree of self-esteem from their raucous but radically independent frame of mind.

The next decade (between 1908 and 1918) was seminal for Lee. He began reading socialist works like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), and quickly came to identify himself as an exploited member of the working-class, although it is important to note that he later committed to the Fabian notion of evolutionary (as opposed to revolutionary) socialism. After moving to the North Island to avoid the authorities he was jailed for a year for smuggling liquor (despite being a teetotaler himself), and on his release in March 1913 began walking the streets of Auckland and reading syndicalist pamphlets by Eugene Debs, Daniel De Leon and Sorel. Erik Olssen suggests that a reading of Jack London produced 'explosive' results, and led Lee to read anything of his that he could find; he was enamoured with both London's socialist vision and his mode of aggressive masculinity, which must have seemed particularly well suited to the New Zealand context. Lee's associations with the nascent left-wing intelligentsia of New Zealand also began during this period through listening to orators like Peter Fraser, Bob Semple, Harry Holland, and future Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage. This was a period of relative turmoil in New Zealand society, prompted by industrial unrest at Waihi (1912) and the ports (1913). The outbreak of war in 1914 provided yet more opportunity for Lee to involve himself with radical politics. In March 1916 he joined the army and was sent to France with the Hawkes Bay Company of the Wellington Regiment. By mid-1917 he had started his writing career with articles for the *Chronicles of the N.Z.E.F.*, where he recounted – in highly romantic terms – the battles he was involved in. Only a few months before the end of the war, Lee lost his arm in action on the Western Front, but not before he had been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for gallantry under fire. Although he befriended men with similar socialist beliefs (in most cases considerably more radical than his own), it does not appear as if military service did much to deepen Lee's left-wing beliefs; the significant point is rather that the war instilled in him an attack mentality that was to be both his servant and master in later years. The deepening of Lee's socialist convictions occurred on his return to New Zealand, amidst the social dislocation of the Depression.

When he arrived back in New Zealand Lee immediately married his sweetheart and joined the Labour party. His wife Mabel was to become a reliable and staunch ally and they were apparently quite radical in their

sentiments, being socialists in politics, sceptics in religion and rebels against Victorian prudery. New Zealand culture of the period has been noted for being peculiarly dependent on Britain for identity, and based upon a repressive Victorian morality, so the Lees' stance was somewhat unusual. More unusual still was Lee's increasingly vociferous championing of New Zealand nationalism, which was still in a nascent state at this time. After gaining entrance to parliament in 1922 (for Labour in Auckland East), he began increasingly to call for economic insulation, initially as a means by which socialism could be effected, and later as a way to protect New Zealand from the worst aspects of the Depression. It is significant, however, that the 'socialism' constantly referred to in relation to John A. Lee was not the traditional, international, brand of socialism that we might expect. Indeed, some commentators, such as W. H. Oliver, have questioned whether class should be used at all in analysing New Zealand of this period. New Zealand society during the interwar years was highly fluid, and although the term 'socialism' was frequently used by politicians and intellectuals alike, it was dissimilar to what was being espoused overseas. Rather, Lee and other New Zealand socialists propounded a mixture of economic self-sufficiency, welfarism, state control of banking, and credit reform. Much of the intellectual scene in New Zealand during the 1930s was directed at working out a mode of socialism that would work in a nascent postcolonial environment, with an economy based on agriculture (rather than industry) and an almost total lack of entrenched class boundaries.

Lee quickly gained a reputation as an excellent orator, capable of silencing critics in parliament with a well-chosen phrase, and firing up audiences with street-corner speeches. Unlike other Labour politicians he refused to engage in traditional public relations exercises (or 'kissing babies' as Olssen puts it), preferring instead to make his mark with forceful banter and overt commitment to his causes. He remained a member of parliament until 1928, when the United Government swept the polls after the aged Joseph Ward made the now famous promise to borrow ten times more than that written in his speech. This failure at the polls was the start of Lee's professional writing career. Over the next three years he wrote several books (including *Children of the Poor* and *The Hunted*), and became increasingly militant. Although he later returned to the Fabian-inspired path of evolutionary socialism, it is believed that he advocated revolution to the Labour party hierarchy during this period. With the onset of the global Depression, growing unemployment and even street violence, New Zealand was beginning to swing towards Labour and the left, and John A. Lee took advantage of the mood. Although plagued by ill-health that was to trouble him the rest of his life, he returned to parliament (for

Grey Lynn) in the 1931 election and began a dual career of public figure and writer that was to last until the later years of his life.

It is impossible totally to separate Lee's political and artistic careers, because they were so obviously connected through his 'socialist' beliefs. In a sense, his political notoriety dove-tailed with his notoriety as an author; his life and personality fed off each other. This is especially true in relation to his first book, *Children of the Poor* (1934), which Lee was initially so concerned about that he had it published anonymously (he felt that the sexual content in this fictionalised autobiography could damage his political career). The book probably had quite the opposite effect, however. Published when New Zealand was deep in economic depression, Lee's mode of stark social realism or 'didactic-realism,' as Lawrence Jones calls it, received high praise in Britain and America and caused an uproar in New Zealand, where the dominant myth was of a Land of Milk and Honey. The central theme is defiance: of society, of fear, of repression and of capitalist exploitation:

This is a story of the gutter. The gutter is not of Paris, of London, of New York, alone. The social gutter is of every clime and race, of village as well as of town, of the New World as of the Old. There is a broad, deep gutter in British Overseas Dominions. The Southern Cross witnesses poverty no less cruel than Northern stars and constellations, although, until recently, more exceptional. At the moment, the oversea [sic] Dominions starve to pay John Bull, the modern Shylock, his pound of interest, and to worship that God of chaos called Deflation.

Lee started the novel the day after the Auckland riots of 1932, and the work is charged with both working-class indignation at capitalist exploitation and overt sexual references which aimed to reform New Zealand's puritanical social pattern. The outcry was such that Hawera Public Library refused to hold it because 'it introduces such gross immorality and dwells upon debasing sexual matters in such a manner that it is considered an unsuitable book'. Olssen suggests that reaction was muted in New Zealand out of respect for the praise the book received at 'Home'. In Britain, but for a small country with only a nascent publishing tradition, Lee's book provoked a heated response and opened up new possibilities for later writers interested in exploring critically New Zealand's provincial and puritanical Pākehā culture. *Children of the Poor* actually works well as a symbolic correlative for Lee himself. Not only is Albany Porcello a typical New Zealand 'Man Alone,' struggling against an unfeeling capitalist system, but in writing the book, Lee engaged in a degree of artistic license which characterized his life as a whole. Porcello, for

instance, is a bastard (the book is prefaced with an Old Testament quote, 'A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord') and his mother and sister are prostitutes, leading the reader towards a heightened identification with the underlying 'socialist' message of the work. Patrick Evans is quite right in noting that Lee's work was old-fashioned as soon as it appeared (probably because of Lee's interest in writers like Upton Sinclair as much as New Zealand's own rather backward culture), but there is an intriguing complexity in the way it documents and mythologises Lee's life at the same time. *Children of the Poor* – and his subsequent writing – served as political propaganda for Lee himself as much as straightforward social realism.

Lee's second novel, *The Hunted* (1936), recounts the life of Albany Porcello again, but this time moves back in time to his incarceration at Burnham Industrial School and subsequent time spent on the run. The story is, of course, a thinly veiled reference to Lee himself, who by this time was known to be the author of *Children of the Poor*, and was beginning to openly court the public notoriety that authorship had provided him with. Like *Children of the Poor*, the writing is again crude and old-fashioned (even for the 1930s) with an underlying masculinist lyricism that acts to romanticise Porcello as both a criminal and a fugitive from a repressive justice system:

Albany Porcello hurried, and some of the summer gladness left his heart. Looking back, he saw the two teams come abreast, and by the turned heads he knew he was being talked about. He knew that they knew what and who he was, and he knew that their interest was hostile. His ears could guess at their words.

Lawrence Jones positions *The Hunted* within the 'provincial' tradition in New Zealand literature (1935-1964), where the child-as-social-victim was a common theme and writers sought to expose their supposedly puritanical society to violence, alienation and sexuality with critical-realism. Lee was, indeed, praised for his forthrightness by many overseas reviewers, but his work was frequently ignored by local periodicals. Despite this, there is a solid argument that his treatment of sexual themes, rather than being revolutionary and open, in fact implicated him in the repressive society he was attempting to critique. Patrick Evans notes that '[s]ex in his novels is always put at the moral distance of the puritan, where it can be controlled and judged,' suggesting that Lee's interest in sexual matters was as immature as that of the rest of his society. This is a rather harsh indictment on an author genuinely attempting to force a change in his country's attitudes towards sexuality, but the point still

stands. It is more difficult to sustain Evans' criticism that Lee's work was essentially conservative; the public uproar alone would suggest otherwise.

The final book in Lee's first, highly productive phase as a creative writer was *Civilian into Soldier: A Novel of the Great War* (1937). In a discursive shift which signified Lee's desire to distance himself from his now infamous criminal past, and perhaps also suggest that he felt he had returned from World War One a different person, he replaced Albany Porcello with John Guy – an adult Man Alone fighting against army discipline rather than social pressures and juvenile detention. Perhaps unfortunately for Lee, *Civilian into Soldier* demands to be read in the context of war literature generally, rather than New Zealand literature; in writing about the Great War he immediately placed himself in the company of Siegfried Sassoon, Erich Maria Remarque, and Ernest Hemingway instead of William Satchell and Jean Devanney. And as war literature, *Civilian into Soldier* betrays all of Lee's weaknesses as a writer: a tendency to romanticise events in a *Boy's Own Adventure* style, coupled with a strong masculinist lyricism that veils terrible incidents with sentimentality; an old fashioned narrative style that is more reminiscent of Upton Sinclair than the modernist writers of the 1930s; an inadequate use of symbolism; and an uneasy combination of autobiography and fiction that undermines the narrator's credibility:

Starts in the sky, red glowings in the heavens and on earth, reverberation until the universe seemed caught in voluntary disintegration and fell to pieces beneath human thought and feet. Wonderful, beautiful, terrible SOS rockets celebrating the high revelry of Mars, telling of hope and fear and religion and horse and man being broken in the night.

The success of John A. Lee's creative writing (it was hard to get a copy of *Children of the Poor* during the 1930s and it eventually sold over 53,000 copies) should not mask his total commitment to politics in this period of his life. His re-entry to parliament in 1931 led to nine volatile years as a politician, where he was closely involved with the rise and eventual success of the first Labour government under Michael Joseph Savage in 1935, the development of New Zealand's extensive state housing scheme, and finally an increasingly volatile relationship with the Prime Minister that led to his expulsion from the party in 1940. His books were supplemented with a number of political pamphlets extolling the virtues of Labour policies (to the extent that a myth arose that Lee actually wrote the Prime Minister's speeches and was the main reason Labour won office, which was false), and attempting to define just how

socialism might work in the New Zealand context. These ideas were put forward in *Socialism in New Zealand* (1938), a book which created huge interest across the country, and inspired intense debate. As mentioned earlier, Lee came to believe that the country's economic basis in agriculture (instead of industry) and lack of clearly demarcated class boundaries meant that the whole basis of the movement would have to be redefined if it was to have any chance of success. Olssen suggests that this Fabian-inspired understanding of socialism was intelligent and that his emphasis on the need for secondary industry rather than land settlement was inherently sensible. It could be added that his constant demand that New Zealand pursue policies of economic insulation to shield itself from fluctuations in the global market also made sense in the context of worldwide Depression. That these ideas flew in the face of New Zealand's obvious (and almost total) dependence on the British market was an economic reality he was apparently not willing to admit, but it does mark him as one of the country's first nationalists – in economics and culture as well literature.

Politically, however, Lee's career was in danger of derailing. He had fallen out with the much-loved Prime Minister, Michael Joseph Savage, as early as the first election win in 1935, and by the 1938 election their relationship was seriously strained. Nevertheless, Lee felt that his position in the party was assured (in part because of the boost his writing had given his public profile) and felt that Savage was too moderate in his views about state control and welfarism. Labour won a landslide victory in the 1938 election, but Lee almost immediately attacked the Prime Minister in *The Lee Letter*, which criticised the government's past and future financial policies. Although ostensibly a private communication, general opinion is that Lee wrote it with the public in mind; either way, it was eventually released publicly and caused the government some degree of discomfort. With the onset of war the following year, Lee began to criticise the Prime Minister more overtly, demanding a position in cabinet for an ex-soldier (the basis of his initial falling out with Savage was the Prime Minister's refusal to give him a cabinet post) and criticising the government's war plans. Despite Savage's failing health and increasing censorship due to wartime conditions, Lee then increased his attacks, effectively alienating himself from people who had previously been his staunch supporters (men like Walter Nash and Bob Semple). In December 1939, he published an article called 'Psycho-Pathology in Politics'. In New Zealand's left-wing magazine *Tomorrow*, which ostensibly referred to politicians like Hitler and Mussolini (Lee had been a staunch opponent of Fascism since the 1920s), but included obvious references to Savage, implying that he was a mentally ill megalomaniac with repressed violent



tendencies. Savage was, in fact, very ill at the time, and died soon afterwards; Lee's attack on him was completely misguided. It reflected over-confidence in the support he held within both the Labour party and the electorate as whole, and misjudged the unparalleled esteem that Savage was held in by the country and his peers. However excessive this adoration of Savage may have been, Lee exhibited poor judgement in attacking him so trenchantly. For his part, Savage had been refusing Lee significant government posts and squeezing him out of every area except housing (by March 1939 an impressive 445 houses had been built) for nine years, and was probably not particularly surprised by his rebellion. Eventually, the Seamen's Union and the Federation of Labour ended the ongoing scandal by demanding Lee's expulsion from the party, which occurred in 1940.

This incident places John A. Lee squarely at the centre of one of New Zealand's biggest political scandals. The country was in uproar over the debacle, and there was much talk about the Labour party being destroyed. True to his nature, Lee remained confident that the radical left of the Labour party would back him in his efforts to start a new party, but this never eventuated and despite his releasing a series of pamphlets explaining his position (with titles like *Expelled From the Labour Party for Telling the Truth*), his new Democratic Labour Party never gained momentum and only one MP followed him in his move from Labour. The DLP gained a number of Labour voters, but Lee was never elected to parliament again and after several years of fruitless effort, and agitation through *John A. Lee's Weekly*, his new party folded.

In a certain sense, Lee's career as a leading writer also ended with World War Two. He did go on to write a successful series of colonial 'yarns' about the Otago folk hero Ned Slattery (extended in *Shiner Slattery* in 1964) and produced a string of other books, but he hit his prime during the 1930s both politically and artistically, and none of his later writings on their own would justify him being named as one of New Zealand's most significant writers. The period after his expulsion from the Labour party can therefore be considered his 'secondary' period in terms of both literature and politics. Aside from the success of *Shiner Slattery*, this second period in Lee's writing produced the second-rate novels, *The Yanks are Coming* (1943) and *Mussolini's Millions* (1970), a continuation of *The Hunted (Delinquent Days, 1967)*, a biography of the 'Booze Baron' Sir Ernest Davis which Ken Arvidson has described as 'scurrilously borderline' (*For Mine is the Kingdom, 1975*), another attempt at a war memoir (*Soldier, 1976*) and a series of reminiscences and memoirs: *Simple on a Soapbox* (1963), *Rhetoric at Red Dawn* (1965), *Political*

*Notebooks* (1973) and the *John A. Lee Diaries 1936-1940* (1981). In addition to his books he continued to produce weekly, fortnightly and monthly papers and engaged in historical writing throughout this period. Another second-rate novel, *The Politician*, was published posthumously in 1987.

No clear consensus has formed about John A. Lee, in either literary or political terms, and he remains a somewhat enigmatic figure. There can be no doubt that he was a figure of cultural and political weight in the interwar period, and *Children of the Poor* was one of the most significant novels produced in New Zealand. But his tendency to mythologise himself through his writing and to act quixotically in the political arena makes interpretation difficult. This is compounded by the nature of his writing career: the first period characterized by engaging characters that demand to be interpreted within the critical framework of New Zealand's 'provincial' period; the second by inferior fiction and questionable biography and autobiography. And yet the critical debate could probably be closed by accepting the simple facts: John A. Lee was a highly creative and productive writer, an energetic politician who gained something of a folk following, and a nationalistic agitator in both fields who appeared to relish his ability to create uncertainty and provoke a response.

## LINKS

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

[New Zealand Book Council](#)

[Te Ara – 1966 Encyclopaedia of New Zealand](#)

[New Zealand Literature File](#)

[Search New Zealand History on line \(includes sound recordings of Lee\)](#)

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