

Memories of John Dias

Union Pioneer and Adventurer

By L.J.W.

THE announcement in The Herald that a bronze memorial tablet to the late John Dias was to be unveiled at the Trades Hall today brought memories to me of those stirring times of 1908-9 in Broken Hill, when the great lock-out (or strike, according to the point of view) was in progress, of intimate and interesting conversations in which I was cast for the listener's role, and which gave me an insight into one of the most versatile minds the industrial labor movement in Australia has produced; and of stories of adventure in our own out-back and in South America. It also took me post haste to the Trades Hall, for I was anxious to see if the sculptor had done justice to my old friend.

My first recollection of John Dias is that of a stout, dark man, with heavy features, and a flowing brown moustache. He was playing solo whist for small stakes in the Democratic Club in Broken Hill towards the end of December in 1908, when men's feelings were inflamed by one of the most bitterly fought industrial conflicts ever known in the Commonwealth.

Others there that night were Tom Mann, who was shortly to be arrested on a charge of sedition and rioting; "Bill" Nutty, then president of the Amalgamated Miners' Association, and leader of the Combined Lockout Committee; "Ernie" Polkinghorne, who was then and still is regarded as one of the Barrier's industrial heroes, because his activities in the long-fought strike of 1892 earned him a term of imprisonment; Jabez Wright, afterwards member of the Legislative Assembly in New South Wales, the undertaker whose term of office as mayor of the Silver City was the most stormy in the history even of troubled Broken Hill; dozens of other Barrier identities, many of whom are still well known on the great silver-lead field, while others have dropped out of sight; and a few visiting Labor Parliamentarians.

Sitting calmly at the card table and playing a wonderfully good game—I found afterwards that he did everything well that he undertook, putting his whole heart and soul into the work of the moment—Jack Dias seemed the least impressive of all that great throng. That was until one saw his eyes—brown eyes, the eyes of a visionary. They explained why his advice was sought and his opinions accepted by men whose names were blazoned forth throughout the length and breadth of the Commonwealth as those who were fighting the just cause of the down-trodden miners, or were ruining one of Australia's great primary industries—again according to the point of view.

Dias had a remarkable career. For years before his death he was secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters, and in 1915 he represented Australia at the General Council of that organisation in England. This body meets every six years, and is attended by delegates from the

This body meets every six years, and is attended by delegates from the whole of the English-speaking world.

But his experiences in the Australian trades union movement dated from a much earlier period, and covered every State on the mainland. He was known from Cape York to Cape Otway, from the Gulf of Carpentaria to the Leeuwin. In 1886 he was one of the founders of the Shearers' Union, the forerunner of the

powerful Australian Workers' Union, and when that organisation was established by the amalgamation of a number of smaller bodies he was elected president of the northern branch, numbering 4000 members.

While occupying this position Dias went through a number of stormy experiences as chairman of the Hughenden strike camp in the shearers' strike. Trades unionism was not then the power that it has since become. Acts that are now perfectly legal, or at worst merely trivial offences punishable by a fine of £1 or so, were then serious misdemeanors. Feeling ran high. The Government sent a detachment of militia to Hughenden. Dias and a number of others were arrested on a charge of conspiracy, and 23 of them were sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from two to three years.

In 1893 Dias resigned his position with the A.W.U. to embark on what was perhaps the greatest adventure of his life. That was a memorable year for many Australians, for then the attempt was made to establish in Paraguay a communal settlement, known as "New Australia," which it was hoped would realise the ideals of democracy and unionism.

The leader was William Lane, founder and first editor of the Queensland Worker, the pioneer Labor journal of Australia. Dias was one of his lieutenants.

The high hopes with which the expedition set forth were not destined to be realised. Human nature was too strong, and what was expected to develop into a modern Utopia quickly became a hot-bed of internal discussion. Ill-luck dogged the new settlement in every way. Early crops failed, and soon the small stock of money the settlers had taken with them began to dwindle. Ultimately it failed altogether. Then ensued the spectacle, in this settlement where everyone had agreed that all property should belong to the community, of most of the settlers trying to seize for their own exclusive use everything that was in sight.

This did not appeal to Dias. He was an idealist and though he contended that the ideal was both right and practicable, he admitted that that attempt to put it into practice had failed. Therefore, he returned to Australia, and Lane went to New Zealand.

It was in 1898 that Dias came back to Australia, when the West Australian goldfields were booming, and he immediately went there. He was soon appointed secretary of the Kal-

ne immediately went there. He was soon appointed secretary of the Kalgoorlie branch of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters. Here he made his one and only attempt to enter the political field—for he was not one who sought the limelight—when he was selected as Labor candidate for the North-Eastern Province in the Legislative Council.

It was from the West Australian goldfields that he drifted to Broken Hill, and from the Silver City he came to Melbourne, where he ended his days.

Man of action and dreamer, Dias was a peculiar mixture. And yet not so peculiar, perhaps. His was essentially the pioneering spirit, and inevitably the pioneer must have something of the visionary in his make-up. Certainly he had seen the "vision splendid." It might have been a wrong vision, but he believed it to be right, and believing that he was prepared to fight for it to the utmost of his power.