

LABOUR DAY and the Christian connection.

Another in the series of “and the Christian Connection.”

William Guthrie Spence

The crack as the first musket went off was like a clap of strange thunder.

‘Gid doon, boyo! Thair feering...’ A rough hand thrust Bill to the ground. He could hardly understand the Irishman’s words. Then it registered: *Get down, boy! They’re firing...*

A volley of muskets roared out. Bill poked his head up long enough to stare in disbelief as unarmed men fell in front of the soldiers’ fire. There was screaming from somewhere in the distance. ‘We don’t have no weapons!’

But it didn’t seem to matter. The officers ordered the soldiers to fire again.

The smoke, the violence, the blood and, above all, the stark injustice of the day imprinted itself on Bill’s mind forever.

Bill was a young boy the day he witnessed events destined to become famous in Australian history: the Eureka Stockade.

He was to grow up to become famous himself: William Guthrie Spence played an instrumental role in the Federation of Australia, transforming the country from individual colonies to one unified nation. He was also to become one of the greatest union organisers in Australia’s history and the most vocal supporter of the fledgling Australian Labor Party.

The Eureka rebellion on the Victorian goldfields helped shape his thinking about justice for workers and fired him to work towards the creation of the Australian Worker’s Union (AWU). However it wasn’t the only thing that ignited his passion for fairness in the workplace. For William Guthrie Spence, there was only one real role model for justice and it wasn’t Eureka. It was Jesus.

In 1892, he wrote: ‘New Unionism was simply the teachings of that greatest of all social reformers, Him of Nazareth, whom all must revere.’

An architect of trade unionism in Australia and, ultimately, around the world, Spence was also a Methodist preacher and Presbyterian elder influenced by the words of the prophet Micah: ‘He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.’ (Micah 6:8 NIV)

William Guthrie Spence constantly argued for the labour movement to be based on the values of Jesus. He was a Christian socialist, always stressing the need to negotiate and reconcile over conflict and confrontation. In 1891, he said he thought strikes were ‘barbarous’ and that he did not believe in them at all. However he also knew working people had to organise themselves or be exploited. His strong Christian beliefs led him to decide that the use of force was never the best way forward. He hoped that employers would come to the unionists and say, ‘We will go, mates, on this or that.’

Mates. That’s the key.

In Bill’s life – from the time he was a young boy to his leadership of workers – it was all about one of the things Australians most valued: *mateship*. But for Bill that could not truly be found outside Christian values and the ultimate act of mateship: the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for the sins of the world. ‘Greater love has no one than this: that he lay down his life for his friends.’ (John 15:13 NIV)

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/spence-william-guthrie-4628>

<http://www.awu.net.au/opinions/william-guthrie-spence-nation-builder-labour-leader-worker>

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