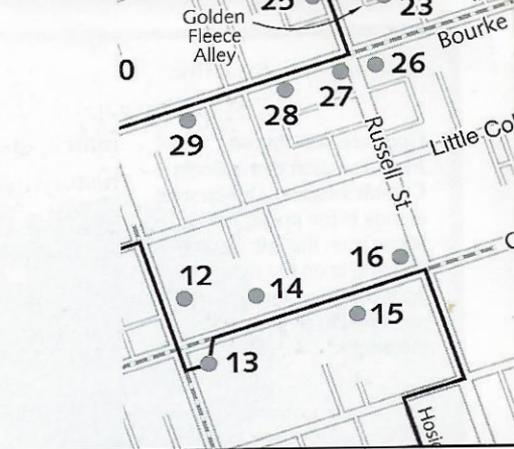


## 16. Unemployed Demonstration

### 140 Collins Street



The Scots Church is a homely building, nestled on the Collins Street hill, and more suited in scale to a small provincial town (as indeed Melbourne was when the church was built). It's difficult to believe that here, in June 1906, *The Age* witnessed:

a mild example of what this earth would be under the regime of Anarchy . . .  
Nothing like it has ever before been seen in Melbourne.

What *The Age* editorialist had encountered was in fact the culmination of a campaign by the jobless to draw attention to the problem of unemployment. Without any government social security net, lack of work presented families with a grim choice – they could either appeal to middle class charity organisations (which would usually assist only after finding the appellant suitably ‘deserving’) or face absolute destitution. A slow economy rendered jobs increasingly difficult to obtain, yet most politicians flatly denied the very existence of unemployment (other than as a result of individual shiftlessness).

In 1905, a group of Melbourne radicals formed the Social Questions Committee (in imitation of similar campaigns conducted by the Fabian Society in Britain) to provide indisputable proof of the jobless situation through a detailed survey of the working class suburbs. The results proved so disturbing (and the indifference of the authorities so palpable) that, by early 1906, the group had evolved from an investigative committee to an agitational political organisation – the Socialist Party (later, the Victorian Socialist Party).

Tom Mann, the driving force behind the party, had already developed into something of a legend (that year, the radical paper *Tocsin* advertised its Trades Union Tailoring Depot with the slogan: ‘Worker! Be a Mann!’), both for leading the British Dock Strike in 1889 and for organising for the Labor Party in Australia. If respectable Melbourne wouldn't go to the unemployed, Mann reasoned, well, the unemployed would go to them. And what better time to confront the well-to-do than on Sunday, when they gathered at church?

Accordingly, on 4 June 1906, a crowd of several hundred unemployed assembled on a vacant block on Swanston Street. Beside Mann, at the head of the

Opposite: *Melbourne Punch's* vision of the Scots Church invasion. Dr Marshall stands in the pulpit; Tom Mann is on the left; Chummy Fleming is on the right. The figure in-between is presumably an invention of the artist.

march, stood the anarchist John William 'Chummy' Fleming, an activist whose history in unemployed struggles stretching back to the mid-1880s had once provoked a conservative politician to declare that 'agitators of the Fleming type should be exterminated like rabbits'. Though personally a gentle, slight individual, Fleming remained indefatigable in defence of liberty, and his presence at the march must have caused the police more than a little concern.

Having previously warned Archbishop Clarke of its intentions, the crowd set off to the corner of Flinders Street, behind twenty women singing 'Hold Up the Red Flag'. When they arrived at St Paul's Cathedral, the Archbishop directed them to specially allocated seats, before preaching a sermon on the text: 'Now if any man have not the spirit of Christ he is none of His'. In the course of his oration, he confessed himself deeply distressed to learn that there were men unable to find work:

How was that so when the country was wonderfully successful? Everywhere around building was going on. Something must be wrong.

A voice – We have too many Parliaments.

Archbishop Clarke – That was a political matter. It was a good thing for a man to save a little money. (Derisive laughter)

Despite the interjections, the service ended amicably with the Archbishop expressing his hope that the church might do more for the genuine unemployed. The protesters left before communion, announcing to those outside their intention to hold a meeting on the Yarra Bank that afternoon.

Over the next weeks, events followed a similar course. Advertisements in *The Age* proclaimed: 'Unemployed Church Parade Sunday morning. Swanston Street. "God Save the People". Meanwhile let us save ourselves.'

Visits to the Australian and Baptist Churches proved successful. Both ministers expressed some sympathy, with the Reverend Charles Strong of the Australian Church offering to personally visit twelve 'respectable' unemployed, 'with the earnest desire to help those who really are in trouble' (although his enthusiasm fell somewhat when Mann replied that Melbourne contained, not twelve, but five thousand men without work).

On 17 June, the protesters decided to take their campaign to the Presbyterian Scots Church. After alerting the church's Dr Marshall of their intentions, about two hundred unemployed proceeded along Collins Street carrying a red flag. According to *The Argus*, two church officers met them at the door, confiscating the flag, and informing Mann that special seats had been reserved:

'Oh, have they?' he said. 'We are not going to be stuck at the back.' Raising his voice, he called, 'Come up to the front, comrades,' and to the front they went, as far as they could get.

In contrast to the other clergy, Dr Marshall presented a stern, unsympathetic figure. The VSP's paper *The Socialist* described:



## DIVINE WORSHIP (?)

(And Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do.)

*THE CLERGYMAN.*—"My Father's house is a house of prayer, and ye have made it a den of agitators."

When the preacher began his sermon, his tone was cold, austere, harsh and emphatic, with profound and dramatic shakings of the head, like a burlesque figure of Jupiter set nodding. He discoursed upon immortality, and had not one word of kindly sympathy or the slightest manifestation of brotherly regard for those in distress.

But let us return to *The Argus*, which provides perhaps the fullest account of the morning's events:

The first part of the service was conducted without any disturbance, except that there was a little groaning when the Rev. Dr Marshall prayed, 'Bless the rich, O Lord, and make them poor in spirit.' . . .

First sign of disorder was a sudden and loud cry of 'Hear, hear' from Mr J.W. Fleming when Dr Marshall was declaring that if there were no life after death there would be a contempt of all authority.

This was the signal for a general outburst from the 'unemployed'. 'What's the good of talking about after death?' shouted one.

Several of the unemployed called, 'Order, order,' and Dr Marshall attempted to proceed. He was assailed by cries of 'Rot'.

This epithet was eagerly repeated by a great number of the 'unemployed' and cries of 'rot, rot,' were mingled with appeals of 'Order' from the less turbulent spirits.

Dr Marshall – Do away with the fear or the hope of immortality (cries of 'Rot' and 'Order') and convince men (interruption) that there is nothing after death –

A voice – Tell us how to keep alive (Disorder).

Dr Marshall – And you ring the death knell of principle.

With proceedings becoming more and more unruly, Chummy Fleming rose to his feet to loudly remind the well-heeled congregation of Jesus' commandment to sell their possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, a declaration greeted with cheers by his comrades.

Less than enamoured of the prospect of debating scripture with a notorious anarchist, Marshall responded with a threat to end the service unless the noise abated. The response did not prove gratifying (one man loudly replied, 'You crucify Christ all the time'; another cried, 'Give us Christ's true history and we will sit still') and so, after a hurried benediction, he retreated behind the vestry.

With Marshall gone, the worshippers filed out (to the jeers of the protesters). As the church emptied, Chummy called for 'Three cheers for the new social revolution'. Meanwhile, Tom Mann demanded of the church officers that Dr Marshall reappear to explain himself. When they refused, he tried to slip past them into the vestry:

He was repeatedly gripped and pushed back by one of the officers. A few of the unemployed closed round, and one of them, turning forward to the

crowd, beckoned them to come forward. For a moment matters assumed a serious aspect, when Mr Fleming, seeming unaware of the struggle at the end of the aisle, opportunely created a diversion by again calling for cheers for new social revolution. These were lustily given.

A final push from one of the officers sent Mr Mann back several paces. Mr Fleming cried, with a loud voice, 'It is written, "My house is a house of prayer, but ye have made of it a den of thieves",' Cheers followed the quotation and many voices took up the cry, 'A den of thieves; a den of thieves.'

When it became clear Marshall would not reappear, the unemployed departed, loudly remarking on the wealth of the church officers as they walked out ('These people are representatives of Christ – nice representatives they are, wearing gold watch chains'). Outside on the street, Tom Mann gave a brief speech, and called for 'Three groans for the anti-Christians'. Later on, at an afternoon meeting on the Yarra Bank, he mocked Dr Marshall's claim not to know of the existence of the unemployed:

What kind of a gospel could he have been preaching if he did not know the distressful conditions existing in the city?

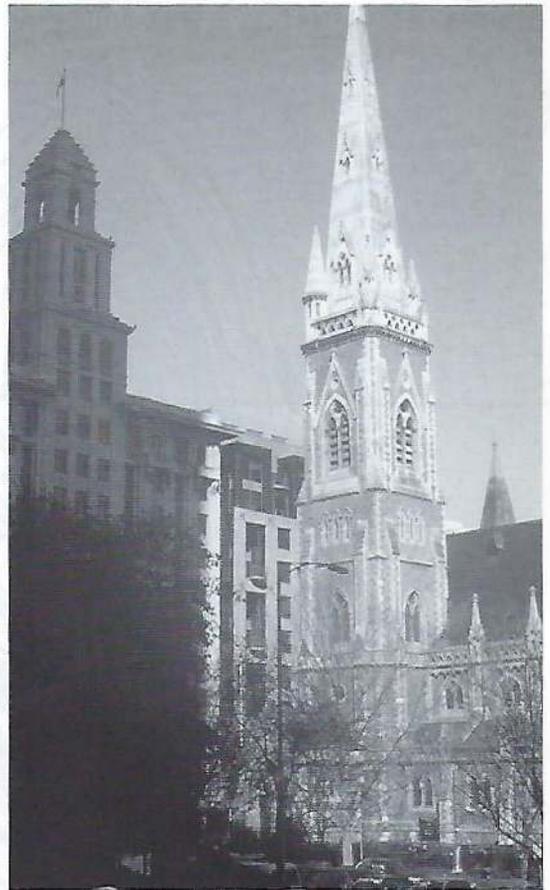
The precise nature of Marshall's gospel became clearer when the good reverend explained to the press: 'I have every sympathy with the unemployed and I would have closed the service in the same way no matter who had made a disturbance – rich or poor', an argument distinctly reminiscent of Anatole France's observation that wealthy and destitute men have an equal right to sleep under bridges.

Over the next week, the fury of respectable Melbourne mounted. *The Age* declaimed against 'an unmannerly little mob of insulting rowdies, led by a Socialist and an Anarchist', and suggested that churches make preparations to defend themselves against further marches. *The Argus* conducted a discussion as to which charges might best be laid against the protesters, while the official Labor Party weighed in, not to support the jobless, but to declare:

The people who were most prominent in the disturbance, although a few are members of our branches, are really not acting in the interest of the Labor Party, but are injuring it more than our greatest enemies can.

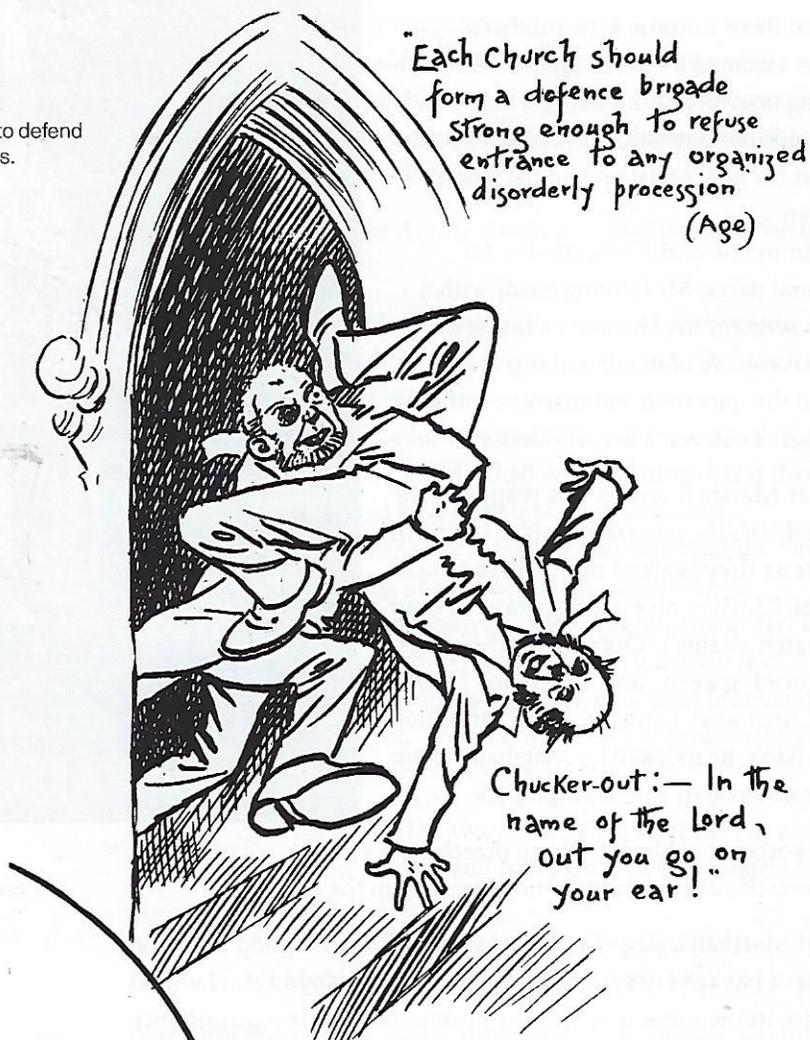
*The Socialist* took the furore as evidence of the campaign's success. At long last, the authorities had been forced to acknowledge the existence of unemployment:

The two capitalist morning papers devoted columns to the subject, chiefly to try and bolster up the plutocracy in their selfish disregard of the suffering



The Scots Church caught in a rare sliver of sunlight.

*The Bulletin* illustrates a suggestion to defend the churches.



around them – but they have to discuss it all the same. Their hands were forced, and that which a fortnight before they refused to notice, now *The Age* and *The Argus* devote leading articles to, and open their columns for letters thereon, providing the letters defend the ‘propuppy, propuppy, propuppy’ crowd sitting tight.

Despite the endeavours of *The Argus*, no charges were laid over the church invasions. The VSP moved on to other activities; Dr Marshall returned to preaching his doctrines of immortality.

Today, the Scots Church remains just as it was in 1906, on a day when two very different worlds collided.