

Who owns Brisbane's Radical Past?

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When a history of the Australian environment movement was published several years ago the joke that went around the environment movement was that the first (and sometimes the only thing) purveyors of the book would read was the index to check if their names were there. If some of the reports we have heard from around the bookshops of Brisbane are true, *Radical Brisbane*,¹ has received a similar response. We feel for Ray Evans and Carol Ferrier, the editors of *Radical Brisbane*, because everyone who has been around the activist scene in Brisbane over the last forty years will want to see themselves, or at least their organizations, represented. Inevitably, given the limitations of such publications, many have been disappointed. The point of this review essay is not to critique the inclusions and omissions in order to assuage individual egos but to further an understanding of the basis of radical politics and to interpret why Brisbane has been the seat of dissent as much as of development in this state.

It is important to begin by noting that there is plenty to like in this collection. While the weakest part of the book is undoubtedly that dealing with the nineteenth century, there are some fascinating insights provided by accounts of the 1865 Bread or Blood riots, the 1890 visit by Henry George, the various chapters on the early trade union movement and the women's suffrage struggles. Several excellent and well known chapters by Raymond

Evans then followed. These included the 1912 Brisbane General Strike; the free speech struggles of 1913-14; conflicts around the conscription issue of 1916-17; and the Red Flag Riots - the infamous events of 1919 that Evans has already popularized. The discussion of the Richard Ramo Temple of Peace was also an illuminating insight into the expressive techniques of the Great War's anti-war movement but we are still shaking our heads over why the Peter Jackson Memorial was even mentioned in the same chapter since it had nothing to do with Brisbane radicalism, conflicts or even an Australian central character, although the conclusion tries hard to justify it.

While it would have been helpful for the editors to indicate in the Introduction their rationale for the content being covered and the book's structure, it becomes obvious what the editors had in mind. Chapters tend to focus on a particular incident and a building or place in the city and give the background and context for the incident. A small (though generally indecipherable) map accompanies each chapter indicating the location of the place or places mentioned in the chapter. This is a riveting read for both a recently arrived resident who identifies with at least some elements of the radical tradition and wanting to know more about how this tradition has played out in the city of Brisbane and for those who lived through the more recent eras and want to remember some of the events or place their memories into perspective. This attempt at a history of place, however, substitutes a sense of romance for any deeper understanding of the source and persistence of the radical tradition in Brisbane. It also unfortunately, like a Soviet photograph from the Stalinist era, serves the purpose of eliding those parts of the radical tradition that the traditional left is not interested in remembering.

The book became more persuasive as the content became more recent. The account of the rock 'n' roll riot of 1956 showed how that innovative music triggered massive shifts in popular attitudes to moral issues while the description of Ro Bognor and Merle Thornton chaining themselves to the bar of the Regatta Hotel in 1965 was a wonderful way to highlight the renewal of the feminist movement in its Brisbane manifestation. The account of the conflicts between punks and police, focusing on the 1979 clash between the two groups at Baroona Hall in 1979 and the pivotal role of radio station 4ZZZ, showed how even cultural events could become part of the struggle against the authoritarian state of that era. For some reason most of the chapters finish before 1980, although the chapter covering the *Murri* history of Musgrave Park does go beyond this. This is a pity because the next two decades are a high point of social movement activism in Brisbane.

The limited range of these chapters highlights the book's main flaw – its uncertainty about what constitutes radical activity. In some ways the content selection is too limited in scope and in others, it is far too wide. The editors have tried to include some social movement activists and organizations but these have usually been those that have had a strong union or political left involvement and the term “radical” really means “traditional left”. Because of this quite narrow interpretation of radical Brisbane, several chapters appear decidedly out of place. Contributions on convict floggings and racial assaults give the impression that the authors are actually more interested in human oppression in Brisbane rather than radicalism. At other times it seems to be a preoccupation with

conflict of any kind. For example, the chapter on the attempted murder of the under colonial secretary, A.W. Manning, was a fascinating insight into two quite prominent men in the colony at the time but contributed little to the book's title. Worse, the chapter on the 1887 Racecourse Riot tried to push a fracas at the racetrack caused by the loss by a favourite in one race into the unconvincing framework of class struggle.

Or is the theme actually extremism; one example of right-wing extremism, Jeff Rickert's chapter on the 1939 Pineapple rebellion, chronicles the role of the right-wing Douglas Credit movement in Queensland which launched a fundamental challenge to the status quo of the time, including through direct action. Carole Ferrier in her "Afterword" states "...in order to understand radical Brisbane adequately, it is always important to keep reactionary Brisbane in full view" because it was often "...able to swamp the [radicals] with its power and its numbers."² This might have been so but there is little apparent rationale for having five different chapters on racial or sectarian conflicts which have little or nothing to do with the radical beliefs of one side or the other. It is tempting to think that perhaps these and several other chapters were included because they were interesting pieces of research that happened to be available rather than because they contributed substantially to the theme.

This is unfair to scholars committed to analyzing why Brisbane as the state's most important metropolitan centre has played a leading role in driving political change and it is unfair to those citizens who played a leading role in driving that change. Historians and social scientists have developed explanations of the social base required to drive

social change and in the aftermath of the mass social protests of the 1960s and 1970s, an international body of work - to which several Brisbane-based scholars have contributed - has described the parameters of social movements and how they undermine and transform civil society.³ The traditional leftism of this book was repeatedly rejected by some of the mass protests that this book describes; and this progressive dissent has been one of the strengths of Brisbane's political culture in the face of the otherwise crude alignment of state politics. It is disappointing to see the informal, unrecorded memories of those who participated in the 1970s right-to-march protests omitted in the Right to March chapter. The period 1977-79 was marked by debate as to whether the anti-uranium issue should be allowed to be hijacked by the civil liberties issue and about just how those civil liberties should be fought for. It was partly recorded elsewhere in Chris Rootes's analysis of the campaign,⁴ but in this collection has been glossed over in favour of the romance of mass arrests in and near King George Square.

Dissatisfaction with traditional leftism on the ground has been reflected in contemporary scholarship on the history and analysis of protest activity. Marxist approaches confined or dismissed social protests on the basis of whether they were 'revolutionary or reformist' or working class- or middle class-based dissent. Successful social movements, however, have been shown to cross class lines; they become mass protests because they respond to a particular material problem, and because they appeal to a fundamental moral failing of the host society. In practice they also reject romantic revolutionary strategies on the grounds that violence is likely to lead to political repression and it is ultimately undemocratic and oppressive. This does not make protest in western democracies

'bourgeois' or 'reformist'; a better label is that used by the European social theorist Touraine of 'self-limiting radicalism'.⁵ In rejecting violence and a repressive reaction by the state, citizen protests can still undermine from within; as one American scholar termed it, 'they seep into institutional structures, transforming their practices and mentalities'.⁶ Citizen protest movements may not be revolutionary but they may still be anti-systemic and therefore radical in their context. How else do you explain the defection of a young Queensland police officer in the midst of the Brisbane right to march protests? And why isn't this young former police officer, Michael Egan, one of the heroes of the *Radical Brisbane* collection?⁷ And how else do you explain the dissent of Brisbane's bishops at crucial times in support of mobilizing Brisbane protests from the 1927 opposition to the open season on koalas to the 1970s right to march issue.⁸ Such figures are traditionally seen as pillars of the establishment, if not part of the forces of oppression by the traditional left. Yet being forced to arrest citizens who posed no criminal threat and the horrific cruelty of the mass slaughter of possums and koalas across the state forced these leading Brisbane residents to join radical causes pitting them against central elements of Queensland's political economy.

The contradictions inherent in imposing an avowedly Christian settler democracy in an imperial outpost hell-bent on development were many. If the radical left is the starting point for historical investigation much of this subversion will be overlooked. Leading voices of dissent in Brisbane from colonial times to the present have included customs officials, magistrates, medical doctors, judges, ministers of religion, scientists, even a commissioner of police. They include individuals such as William Duncan and Alfred

Davidson who stood up against the violence of frontier race relations, the murderous procedures of the Queensland Native Police, and criminal blackbirding in the Pacific,⁹ Doctors Thomson and Douglas who agitated about the lack of a public health system to prevent epidemics of typhoid in Brisbane in the 1870s and 1880s,¹⁰ Justice Lutwyche who risked his judicial appointment in opposing the loss of manhood suffrage after separation in 1859,¹¹ and the Brisbane meetings of the Royal Geographical Society of Queensland which first raised the issue of national parks for the state,¹² all before we even get to the twentieth century.

The social location of these brave individuals also points to another defining element of social protest and that is its relative and variable nature. Nineteenth century missionaries, Edwardian era foresters with scientific training, postwar marine biologists and 1980s housewives living in the toxic-contaminated suburb of Kingston¹³ were not born radicals, the circumstances of their life and work drove them to confront a social problem while many of their colleagues and neighbours further away continued to work within the system's limits. Yet the agitation of such men and women brings about not only structural adjustment but new ways of seeing and understanding the world, a cultural change that the next generation takes for granted and no longer perceives as radical.

Some of these campaigns took years and some such as the campaigns against racial violence and the Queensland Native Police despite constant pressure were never successful. But rarely did these individuals speak out alone; they were usually either part of a cross-colonial or international movement or the leading voices of purely local

campaigns that went to the heart of the contradictions of Queensland's political economy – incipient protest movements around the persistent themes of Indigenous rights, environmental protection and democratic rights. Their causes may not seem radical by today's standards, but the opprobrium that their stand earned and the condemnation of colonial and state politicians make it clear that their concerns went to the heart of Queensland development and were indeed disdained as radical.

It is no coincidence that these brave individuals were Brisbane based. Social movement theorists argue that it is not class repression that drives social conflict. (Indeed the greater the repression the more intimidated the citizenry and the more rare and perhaps foolhardy the dissenter.) A radical agitation requires the confidence of a number of people who believe that they have a chance of success and are therefore prepared to risk standing up for something. In the Queensland context that has usually either meant the confidence that comes from having specific technical or other expertise about a social problem and/or access to political power. In other words educated and professional people with this sort of access have been more likely to live in Brisbane as the seat of government and the economic and bureaucratic capital. They had the confidence and the means to initiate dissenting behaviour which then attracted a base of support from others who felt their grievances had been ignored or marginalized by mainstream politics. Brisbane, unlike the provincial centres, has also been large enough to sustain socially critical sub-cultures.

Historically this social base has resulted in Brisbane's political alienation from the rest of the state's heartlands whose livelihoods were dependent on an agrarian and mining economic base and added to the atmosphere of cultural repression. Although the book covers aspects of the struggles against state authoritarianism by both Labor and National Party governments, there is no analysis of how this left-right congruence affected the development of progressive forces in Brisbane. In relatively recent times suspicion of traditional left party politics resulted in activism dominated by two of the most unexpected allies, Brisbane's radical Christians and the libertarian left.

While J.D Lang and Duncan McNab had set the precedent of prophetic denunciation of political corruption in nineteenth century Brisbane, the inspiration for the church-led protests of the 1970s owed more to the effects of Vatican II. In the mid to late 1970s, Brisbane Catholic priest, Reverend Wally Dethlefs, was posted as chaplain to the notorious Wilston Youth Hospital, a misnamed institution that was virtually a prison for young runaways and other youth who had had the misfortune to end up in state "care". His concern about the abuse of young people incarcerated in the "hospital" led to the founding of Justice for Juveniles, a broadly Christian group committed to advocacy for the rights of young people that began meeting in a disused Anglican Church in Charlotte Street. This church was already the meeting place for a group of socially committed young Christians who called themselves the House of Freedom. The Anglican Church soon sold the building, which became the Pancake Manor, but by the mid-70s the House of Freedom had established themselves as a dedicated community within the suburb of West End. Committed to the communal and redistributive ideals of the early Christian

church, the group grew to incorporate several families and singles in shared households around Highgate Hill and West End with a meeting place at 69 Thomas Street. Their engagement with the local community soon led to several successful and innovative community projects from involvement with groups such Street Arts and Rock & Roll Circus to the beginnings of the West End Housing Co-op and for a while their own newspaper, *Dayspring*; their broader influence also contributed to the local parish of the Uniting Church establishing West End Community House which became involved in a number of struggles although that story is more properly part of the 1980s.

Other young people influenced by Wally Dethlefs and 1970s Christian radicalism were Ciaron O'Reilly and his brother Sean. Ciaron and later Sean also established an activist West End household which evolved into the Catholic Worker and later Justice Products and Dorothy Day House. Ciaron's dissent from orthodox leftism led him to Brisbane's libertarian scene providing an interesting and productive network between Brisbane's Christian and left political communities.¹⁴

The most prominent figure among the local libertarians was Brian Laver; a charismatic and controversial figure, Brian helped to develop the Brisbane anarchist network into one of the largest in Australia. By 1980 his group, the Libertarian Socialist Organisation, had federated with Ciaron O'Reilly's radical Christian group, eco-anarchists, communitarian nonviolence advocates and other supporters to form the People for Direct Democracy which carried on the struggle for free speech well into the eighties. Given Brian Laver's influence and the ability of the anarchist groups of the seventies and early eighties to

mobilise unexpectedly high numbers in various campaigns it is surprising that they have been overlooked in *Radical Brisbane*.

Like many Christians before them, however, most Brisbane religious radicals focused their energies in the peace and anti-uranium movement. Socially-committed Catholics under the influence of liberation theology had established Action for World Development [AWD] which campaigned on third world, anti-racism and Indigenous issues. In 1977 AWD and the Quakers were two of the Christian groups who applied for a permit to hold an anti-uranium march. As that campaign famously became blocked by Bjelke-Petersen's anti-street march laws, an ecumenical group of clergy who called themselves Concerned Christians, gave one of the most creative boosts to the right to march campaign by holding a prayer vigil in Queens Park which led to their arrests for singing hymns without a permit.¹⁵ Concerned Christians' very prominent role during the civil liberties campaign is completely overlooked in *Radical Brisbane*, although members such as Ron Marsh, Dennis Conomos, John Woodley, Ray Barraclough, Pam Jones, Dick Pascoe, Trevor Jordan, Coralie Kingston and Noel Preston were influential in broadening and strengthening dissent across the city.

The radical Christians' commitment to the peace movement was unabated by the civil liberties campaign. Ron Leeks led the Campaign Against Nuclear Power in the 1970s and Rev Dr Noel Preston became leader of the People for Nuclear Disarmament in the 1980s. The House of Freedom peace group were the first activists to object to the glorification of the Vietnam commemorations, bravely confronting the military and

Anglican hierarchies over the inclusion of weapons and the omission of Vietnamese war dead in the annual Long Tan religious services.¹⁶

Given the strength of these campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s, the concern is that the scant attention that they have received, like the Brisbane anarchist scene, is due to their ill-fit with a traditional left orthodoxy. The Brisbane peace movement, then as now, was shaken by repeated Left attempts to force an exclusively anti-American line, while the wider movement was being drawn to the success and moral superiority of the non-violence of the United States civil rights movement. The University of Queensland academic, Ralph Summy, was enormously influential in promoting this stream of thought in the Brisbane radical scene and the journal which he helped to found, *Social Alternatives*, commenced publication in 1977. Yet the entire counter-cultural scene with its attempts at various urban communities,¹⁷ its successful Red Hill Co-op and its contemporary legacy of community gardens and the Northey Street City Farm is given no serious consideration.

While there is little treatment of the peace movements prior to the anti-Vietnam War and of church-based social justice movements, there is none at all of the gay movement - despite Clive Moore and Graham Willett's ground-breaking work on this history¹⁸ - or the conservation movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is corrected to some extent in the treatment of more recent decades with the recognition that radical activism is not the sole preserve of the Left and the trade unions and the addition of material on the anti-racist, Indigenous rights and feminist movements. However, there

is nothing on the great conservation campaigns. It might be forgivable to omit the big national park campaigns led by Romeo Lahey from World War One to the 1960s, since they are not well known among the general public; yet it seems strange for a history committed to a sense of place to have overlooked the old boxing stadium on the corner of Charlotte and Albert Streets; sitting in a car outside what became Festival Hall, Romeo Lahey and Arthur Groom excitedly planned the formation of the National Parks Association of Queensland which was founded in April 1930.¹⁹

However, for Judith Wright's name to appear in the index but not for her leadership of one of the greatest environmental struggles in Australian history – the Great Barrier Reef campaign – is reprehensible. She and her friend Kathleen McArthur and David Fleay formed the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland in 1963. They recruited many talented and influential supporters, including the highly respected rainforest ecologist, Dr Len Webb. The Great Barrier Reef campaign which remobilized the environment movement nationally was underway by 1965. Despite being accused of being communists and anti-American, Judith Wright and her supporters refused to be dismissed by the state's immense pro-development forces. By 1969 she had won the support of one of the Brisbane Left's heroes, Labor Senator George Georges, who became president of the Save the Reef Committee in 1969 and began to urge the Transport Workers Union and the Queensland Trades and Labor Council for a drilling work ban on the reef.²⁰ Other important Brisbane support came from a young marine scientist, Eddie Hegerl who formed the Australian Littoral Society in 1965; it has since transformed itself into a national environment organization, the Australian Marine Conservation Society.²¹

The 1960s and 70s were a time of unprecedented growth and development pressures in Brisbane provoked a number of struggles. The Brisbane City Council under the leadership of a property developer lord mayor, Clem Jones, showed little respect for local parklands; there were plans for freeways across the city and a number of important heritage buildings, such as the Regent Theatre and the Bellevue Hotel, were at risk of demolition. Anti-freeway groups formed in Bowen Hills in 1975-76 and numbers of residents came into the streets after midnight in April 1979 to oppose the destruction of the Bellevue.²² The newly formed Queensland Conservation Council, founded in 1969, appointed John McCabe as its first co-ordinator with the explicit goal of seeking to advise and liaise with the many local environment campaigns across the state. Consequently, in the 1960s and 70s even regional environmental campaigns, such as the opposition to sand mining on Fraser Island, had a significant Brisbane component. Perhaps the absence of an expressly Left presence in these campaigns means that they have not been deemed to pass the 'radical' test but they were resource and citizen-based campaigns that went to the heart of Brisbane's and Queensland's development.

Even the large anti-uranium mobilizations of the mid to late seventies, which did have a significantly Left presence, are only mentioned in the context of one of the civil liberties rallies. Yet the offices in Ann Street of the Campaign Against Nuclear Power under Bob Phelps's co-ordination were a hub of activism in the 1970s. In fact, not one conservation campaign gets a mention in the book, despite the importance of environmentalism in the anti-Joh struggles in Brisbane and Queensland and for the contribution of ecological

concepts to radical political thinking during this period. By the 1980s the peace, green, democratic and land rights struggles would dominate radical politics in Brisbane.

Radical Brisbane's coverage of the preceding years would have us believe these new protest movements materialized from nowhere.

This criticism might seem harsh for what is an enjoyable stroll through the streets of Brisbane. Yet for those of us committed to studying, analyzing and enacting radical social change, it is frustrating to see a romance of place usurp a more honest appraisal of various campaigns and the thrill of political repression substituted for a broad analysis of the diversity and vibrancy of Brisbane's rich, if unorthodox, counterculture.

¹ Raymond Evans & Carole Ferrier (eds), *Radical Brisbane: An Unruly History*, Carlton North Vic., Vulgar press, 2004.

² Evans & Ferrier, *Radical Brisbane*, p. 320.

³ For example, B. Misztal & K. Ferres, 'Expanding the spaces of deliberation,' *Feminist Review*, vol.70, Issue 1, 2002, pp. 144-148; Chris Rootes, 'Protest, Social Movements, Revolution? An Overview,' *Social Alternatives*, vol.4 no.1, March 1984, pp. 4-8; Chris Rootes, 'Social Movements – An Overview and Prospect,' *Social Alternatives*, vol.6, no.4, November 1987, pp. 2-4; T. Doyle, 'The Structure of the Conservation Movement in Queensland,' *Social Alternatives*, vol.5, no.2, 1986, pp. 27-32; T. Doyle, 'Dissent and the Environment Movement,' *Social Alternatives*, vol.11, no.1, 1992, pp. 24-26; Timothy Doyle, *Green Power: The Environment Movement in Australia*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2000; 'Introduction' in Drew Hutton & Libby Connors, *A History of the Australian Environment Movement*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁴ Chris Rootes, 'The Civil Liberties Campaign in Queensland: Lessons for the Future,' *Social Alternatives*, vol.3 no.2, March 1983, p.58

⁵ Alain Touraine, Francois Dubet, Michel Wievoiorcka and Jan Strzelecki, *Solidarity: The Analysis of a Social Movement 1980-1981*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

⁶ Roberta Garner, *Contemporary Movements and Ideologies*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1996, p. 385.

⁷ Ross Fitzgerald, *A History of Queensland: From 1915 to the 1980s*, St Lucia, UQP, 1984, p.575. In the 1980s another young police officer, Nigel Powell, similarly resigned in protest. He later joined the New

South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption and recently spoke out against a state funeral for Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen; see Nigel Powell, 'Joh Bjelke-Petersen's send-off should befit his legacy to Queensland,' *Online Opinion*, 18 August 2004, <<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=2464>.

⁸ Jacqui Donegan, 'Unfair Game: Queensland's Open Season on Koalas in 1927,' *Access History*, vol.3, no.1, 2001, pp. 35-49; Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland*, p.577.

⁹ Denis Cryle, "'Snakes in the Grass': The press and Race Relations at Moreton Bay 1846-47," *Brisbane: Aboriginal, Alien, Ethnic*, Brisbane, BHG Papers no.5, 1987, pp. 23-33.; Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1998, pp. 102-105.

¹⁰ Ross Patrick, *A History of Health and Medicine in Queensland 1824-1960*, St Lucia, UQP, 1987.

¹¹ G.P. Shaw, "'Filched from us...': The Loss of Universal Manhood Suffrage in Queensland 1859-1863," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol.26, no.3, 1980, pp. 372-384.

¹² Hutton & Connors, *Environment Movement*, p. 33.

¹³ Thelma Towers and the Residents Against Toxic Substances are discussed in Hutton & Connors, *Environment Movement*, pp. 215-216.

¹⁴ Ciaron O'Reilly's continuing activism against nuclear weapons has led to him serving time in prisons in the United States and Ireland. He has written of his political activism in Brisbane and overseas in two memoirs, *The Revolution will not be Televised: A Campaign for Free Expression in Queensland*, Sydney, Jura, 1986; & *Remembering Forgetting: a journey of non-violent resistance to the war in East Timor*, Otford NSW, Otford, 2001.

¹⁵ Mark Plunkett & Ralph Summy, "Civil Liberties in Queensland: A Nonviolent political campaign," *Social Alternatives*, vol.1 nos6/7, 1980, p. 83.

¹⁶ Edmund Coxsedg, *A Vagabond for Peace*, West End Q., House of Freedom Christian Community, 1991, p.108.

¹⁷ See Bill Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality: Cooperative Lifestyles in Australia*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 1995, p. 11.

¹⁸ Clive Moore, *Sunshine and Rainbows: The Development of Gay and Lesbian Culture in Queensland*, St Lucia, UQP, 2001; Graham Willett, *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia*, St Leonards NSW, Allen & Unwin, 2000.

¹⁹ Hutton & Connors. *Environment Movement*, p. 71.

²⁰ Judith Wright, *The Coral Battleground*, West Melbourne, Thomas Nelson, 1977, pp. 84, 105-06.

²¹ Hutton & Connors, *Environment Movement*, p. 101.

²² Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland*, pp. 446-49 & 454-56.