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## A radical history book: how we came to write it

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## A radical history book: how we came to write it

### **Abstract**

Rowan Cahill and I have lived with the idea of this book since December 2001, when Ian Syson, an independent publisher from Melbourne, suggested to us that we might write about Sydney for a series of books on 'radical cities' published by his 59 company, Vulgar Books. The organizing idea was a walking tour of about 50 places associated with radical events or people in the city, each site identified on a map, described in a short slab of text, and illustrated by two images: one of the site as it was at the height of its radical notoriety and another as it is today. The first in the series, Radical Melbourne, had sold a couple of thousand copies and Ian was anxious to capitalize on this success.



## **A Radical History Book: How we came to write it, and why it is radical**

**Terry Irving**  
University of Wollongong

An address to a meeting in Sydney of the Australian Society of Archivists (NSW), July 2010

**Rowan Cahill and I** have lived with the idea of this book [1] since December 2001, when Ian Syson, an independent publisher from Melbourne, suggested to us that we might write about Sydney for a series of books on ‘radical cities’ published by his

company, Vulgar Books. The organizing idea was a walking tour of about 50 places associated with radical events or people in the city, each site identified on a map, described in a short slab of text, and illustrated by two images: one of the site as it was at the height of its radical notoriety and another as it is today. The first in the series, *Radical Melbourne* [2], had sold a couple of thousand copies and Ian was anxious to capitalize on this success.

It seemed like a piece of cake, especially as Lucy Taksa and I had just compiled the *Labour Heritage Register of New South Wales* [3], which we believed would point us to the sites to write about. So we said yes.

Then the problems began. Transplanting the walking tour idea seemed almost impossible. While the Melbourne authors (Jeff and Jill Sparrow) could plan a manageable walk because their sites were concentrated in the centre of Melbourne, our sites were much more dispersed. We began to talk about three separate walks to take in radical sites in the inner suburbs; clearly this was an unwieldy solution. Worse: most of Sydney's radical buildings had been pulled down. In March 2002, after taking a walk around the CBD to look at radical sites I wrote to Rowan that the result was depressing: I saw 28 sites, of which the original buildings on 19 were gone completely, on 3 they were still visible, and on 6 they were possibly extant, that is hidden behind new facades.

The walking tour idea was also intellectually troublesome for us. We were historians; the authors of *Radical Melbourne* were not. We had a long-standing interest in the changing forms, aims, methods, and discourses of radicalism. How could we convey this history to readers if the book's chapters jumped around in time in order to meet the requirements of a pedestrianized view of the past? We felt we wanted to explore themes and provide a sense of a radical tradition, in other words to write a chronologically arranged story. But we also felt we had to be loyal to the publisher's concept for the book.

Our progress slowed down while we failed to deal with this dilemma. It was still unresolved when our publisher postponed the delivery date. Eventually, he cut us adrift and we had to find a new publisher, UNSW Press, who luckily pushed us in the direction we needed to go. But that came much later, in

2008. In the meantime we put the book on the back-burner and worked on different projects.

Mine was a history of the practice of democracy in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century – which became *The Southern Tree of Liberty*. [4] I discovered four things that reinforced my desire to write a radical history of Sydney rather than a guide for a radical walking tour.

First, I discovered that radical democrats (both working people and intellectuals) played a larger and more innovative role in the struggle for self-government than I expected.

Second, it became clear to me that the theorists of representative government, who argued that the reason for its introduction was to curtail democracy, i.e. popular sovereignty, were correct. In Sydney, liberals as well as conservatives argued for representative government in order to disarm the radical democrats, and they used their power in the legislature to pass laws repressing democratic politics.

Third, I could see how Sydney's topography separated Sydney's working people from the dwellings of their rulers, and I could trace the emergence of a spatial or regional identity for radical politics in the inner suburbs of the south and west of the city.

Fourth, I was amazed to discover that violence was commonplace in the politics of the period. During election campaigns property was destroyed, demonstrators were injured and two people were killed. Crowds celebrated January 26<sup>th</sup> and the Queen's Birthday by attacking police stations. The Irish and the British fought the Battle of the Boyne again on the streets of Sydney. Unemployed workers, men and women, menaced the Governor and tried to provoke a convict revolt. On the western goldfields huge crowds burnt effigies of Wentworth. These were not rare events: every year there were several occasions when the military were called out to restore order in the city and towns. The working people and radical intellectuals were menacing authority and demanding a democratic government, and the more the government resorted to force the more violence there was.

I was not prepared to recognize this violent political terrain. My work with Raewyn Connell on the history of the class structure in Australia, which became the book *Class*

*Structure in Australian History* [5], had established for me the importance of the social structuring of power as a subject for historical writing, but it was written under influence of the theory of cultural hegemony. Hegemony functions to preclude the need to impose ruling power by force, and it defuses a forceful response by those who are ruled. But *The Southern Tree of Liberty* showed violence popping up all over the place. I had to rethink the history of rule and of being ruled. I had discovered the limits of hegemony, a moment when the state's use of police and military force was as important for maintaining the social order as a more generalised and impersonal control exercised through a ruling culture. That was in the 1840s and 50s. Other historians had looked at this period but not understood the meaning of its violence. Could they have misunderstood other periods of turbulence too: the 1880s, or the 1910s, or the 1930s, or the 1970s? Perhaps in Australia's past, to use the words of my co-author, 'significant political and social ferment, dissent, turbulence are not strangers, nor occasional'.

Rowan Cahill has been a comrade, collaborator and sounding board for my ideas ever since the 1960s, so of course he was privy to this readjustment of my thinking. Indeed, freed from building an academic career by discovering ever-more ingenious ways to confirm the dominant paradigms, he had been working towards the same position about how to write Australian history for longer than me.

So, with his words in my ear it did not take much reflection to see that these discoveries about the 1840s and 50s did not fit into the mainstream of Australian historical writing: a mainstream that celebrates the liberal businessmen and landowners rather than the working men and women in the coming of parliamentary government; that assumes that parliamentary government is synonymous with democracy; that neglects the importance of place in the formation of the labour tradition; and that plays down violence or the threat of violence in our history.

When we returned to working on *Radical Sydney* we knew that we were going to write the kind of history that had not been written since Lloyd Ross introduced us to Billy Lane struggling with utopian communism in Paraguay, or since Bert Evatt wrote about the Tolpuddle Martyrs, or Brian Fitzpatrick

celebrated working class politics in his short history of the labour movement, or Gordon Childe skewered the Labor Party for betraying the hopes of Australia's 'proletarian democrats'.

Drawing on this tradition our book would be an example of radical history, rejecting the top-down, consensus version of our history, and presenting instead a history of ruling and being ruled, of the violence this entailed, a history of turbulence and alternative ways of thinking and doing.

We were definitely not interested in defending the position attacked by John Howard in the History Wars – ours would not be a 'black armband' version of history. The academic historians of race, gender and ethnicity (John Howard's targets) have widened our understanding of the different kinds of oppression and of how oppression was internalized. Subjectivity and identity became their new buzz-words. All of this we applaud. But they turned to linguistic theory to make sense of this new focus, and in the process forgot about the material world. They lost sight of context, and of the structures of class and power. So they had (and have) very little to say to a world where freedom is shrinking, violence is increasing, species are disappearing, and politicians are lying.

Nor would our story of the past be a bloodless, apolitical 'history from below', a re-run of the trivialized 'people's history' of the 1960s and 70s.

There was one aspect of that earlier 'people's history', however, that we did want to emulate. We wanted to speak to an audience wider than academic historians and their students. Most academic historians prefer theory and jargon to story telling; they write only for each other. But there are some academic historians with a commitment to social change who do reach out to a wider readership with narrative and political stance. The trouble is: their books about the plight of women, aborigines, migrants and workers in the past don't sell, except to specialists and niche readers. Why is this?

I think the stories they tell are the problem. The oppressions of the past when explored through the construction of identity, the process of representation, and the deconstruction of texts will never grab an anxious person [6] by the elbow, even if enticed by whispers about justice and recognition of difference. Instead the non-academic reader feels talked-down to and

short-changed. She fails to find a serious treatment of the most basic democratic, almost instinctive, response to oppression, the gathering together of people to demonstrate their feelings in public. The subjects in these books are shown as empowered to know who they are, but not how they can act. They have no agency, and they leave the reader with no useful lessons from the past.

Radical historians believe that the kind of historical writing that will connect with today's problems is one in which the material world of action and power is given equal standing with the world of representations and texts. We write a history in which language is not seen as the most important element of politics. For example, we want history to give us the back-story of the economic and political interests, forces and events that allowed liberal political systems to be taken over by business elites. We write a history in which ordinary people have agency as well as identities, and we want to know why agency in the past has sometimes worked and why at other times interests and structures have defeated popular action.

Our book is an illustrated popular history, not a scholarly monograph, so finding new sources, or working in a new way with old sources, was not our main consideration. But there are two source-related aspects of the book that you might find interesting.

In 1950 I learnt about the unemployed camps in the Great Depression of the 1930s from Vera Deacon, a young woman living with my family during the post-war housing shortage. In these camps of humpies made of tin, sacking and boxes she had spent eight years of her childhood. As I became more involved in radical politics I discovered that the collective memory of marches and meeting places, campaigns and organizations, including those of the 1930s, was a significant marker of identity for the left. So, when I decided to write about Sydney's eviction wars of 1931, I was delighted to find on Lee Rhiannon's website her memory of her parents and friends sitting around the kitchen table in Newtown recalling the siege of Union Street. In fact there are radio programs, plays, songs and novels (and several theses) about that pitched battle between the police and the Unemployed Workers' Movement, whose members were trying to prevent the eviction of families unable to pay rent. So



this exciting and empowering event, which has since fed into the creative imagination, is remembered by lots of people.

So, popular memory has been an important source for us. The book has about 20 chapters dealing with the period from the 1920s to the 1980s that draw on recent memories recollected in print or on the Internet. In the process of using these sources we discovered something about how radical history is transmitted: we found older radicals in the city passing on their experiences to a younger generation. For example, when the Black Power radicals came to Redfern in the 1970s they found a suburb with an existing militant tradition, a tradition that included support for Aboriginal rights. They met Aboriginal worker, Chicka Dixon, who had received his political education in the militant Waterside Worker's Federation. Another example: the Whitlam-era students of the New Left, in pursuit of alternative organizing spaces (for women's liberation, the free university, underground media, racial equality, resident action and so on) went to live in the inner-city suburbs, where they met and learnt from their neighbours, working-class activists of the Old Left. Creating popular memory through this process of transmission was a political act, just as our history is.

The other distinctive source is archival. Every radical historian will tell you how exciting it is to discover the evidence of radical persons and events obsessively preserved in the files of the security and intelligence organizations of the state. In our case, most of the chapters on the period from the First World War rely partly on these files, researched either by us or by the scholars whose publications we used as sources. Sometimes other archival collections were used. I was able to follow Gordon Childe's career with the NSW government through the files of the Premier's Department.

Finally, let me quote from Anna Clark, a feminist historian in the United States who is critical of the way in which the linguistic turn has made historians fearful of narrative:

We understand of course that when historians write narratives they are constructing delusive stories. ... However, popular audiences crave stories and personal narratives rather than austere critiques. We have come to understand, for instance, that the Chartist movement drew in huge numbers of working-class people, not because they

had the correct socialist analysis of working-class identity, but because they constructed powerful metaphors and rhetorics which evoked working class misery and promised a better day. Can we write stories which engage audiences from a radical, rather than a conservative perspective without delusions? [7]

In our book, Rowan and I have tried to write stories that engage people from a radical perspective. Anna Clark worries about deluding people. I think that the best way to expose a delusion is to act, and radical history ought to make people want to act. It might be impossible to write a non-delusive narrative, according to proponents of the linguistic turn, but if people are persuaded to act as a result of our stories of the past, why should we feel that we have failed them?

### Notes

- 1 Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill, *Radical Sydney – Places, Portraits and Unruly Episodes*, UNSW Press, Sydney 2010.
- 2 Jeff Sparrow and Jill Sparrow, *Radical Melbourne – A Secret History*, The Vulgar Press, North Carlton, 2001.
- 3 Terry Irving and Lucy Taksa, *Places, Protests and Memorabilia – The Labour Heritage Register of New South Wales*, Industrial Relations Research Centre, The University of New South Wales, 2002.
- 4 Terry Irving, *The Southern Tree of Liberty – The Democratic Movement in New South Wales before 1856*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 2006.
- 5 R.W. Connell and T.H. Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History – Poverty and Progress*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1992 (second edition).
- 6 Anxiety: a rather tiresome post-modernist trope.
- 7 Anna Clark, 'The Holy Grail of Radical History', *Radical History Review*, 79 (2001), pp. 87–88.