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Review - Radical Sydney: places, portraits and unruly episodes

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Review - Radical Sydney: places, portraits and unruly episodes

Abstract

If so much of Sydney's physical space was saved in the 1970s by Jack Munday and the NSW BLF, then much of its historical record has been preserved in this fine book by Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill. It's an ambitious but successful attempt to trace our radical roots from the arrival of the first Europeans through to the present day.

Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill, *Radical Sydney: Places, Portraits and Unruly Episodes* (UNSW Press 2010)

Reviewed by Maurie Mulheron

If so much of Sydney's physical space was saved in the 1970s by Jack Munday and the NSW BLF, then much of its historical record has been preserved in this fine book by Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill. It's an ambitious but successful attempt to trace our radical roots from the arrival of the first Europeans through to the present day.

The book is divided into almost 50 chapters, each relating to a significant political struggle, or 'unruly episode', that took place in a suburb of Sydney, or more often, the inner city. This approach proves to be the book's great strength, providing as it does an episodic history while preserving a chronology and historical narrative. The reader can either follow the subtle narrative as a whole, from start to finish, or delve into a particular area of interest. (A map of historical sites encourages the reader to blend the geography with the history). This structure should prove popular with students and teachers of history.

But it is the authors' attention to detail, their ability to unearth obscure yet fascinating anecdotes, which will keep bringing readers back to the book. Who could resist the story of Lucien Henry, a leader of the Paris Commune who having survived the guillotine, was transported to New Caledonia, then eventually pardoned, before finding his way with his wife Juliette, to Victoria Street, Kings Cross. An artist, ardent republican and agitator, the only physical signs of Henry's presence in Sydney are the two beautiful stain glass windows he designed that now dominate the stairwells flanking the Main Hall of the Sydney Town Hall.

How many of us knew at the time of the Patrick's war

against the waterside workers and their union in 1998 that the stevedoring company had been founded by James R. Patrick, who, in the 1930s, was one of the main financiers of the fascist New Guard? Or that the first *Women's Weekly* was printed on the presses of the Australian Workers' Union after the union had been betrayed by its then President, 'Red Ted' Theodore as he sought to curry favour from his new business buddy, a young Frank Packer?

The enduring relationship between the city's radical Left and the artistic community is well documented. Lisa Milner's research on the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit has been covered extensively in her own book, *Fighting Films*, but her chapter in *Radical Sydney* is an important contribution as is Michelle Arrow's piece on Sydney's New Theatre. The chapter, *Dorothy Hewitt and the Redfern Reds*, recalls the 1940s and 1950s when Redfern was part of Sydney's 'red belt' with Communists elected to Redfern's municipal council, the Party using the Henry Lawson Memorial Hall in Regent Street as its headquarters while the writer, Dorothy Hewitt, allowed her home in Marriott Street to be used as a distribution point for the CPA's newspaper, given its close proximity to factories and the Eveleigh Railway Workshops. The story of *Oz* magazine, with its first edition published appropriately on April Fools' Day, 1963, reflects the optimism of the early 1960s as Australia emerged from the 'frightened fifties'.

But it's all there: from the striking soldiers rallying in 1916 at Central Railway Station to the anti-eviction battles of the unemployed, the early indigenous political formations, through to the protests against the war in Vietnam, the violent siege of Victoria Street during the Green Bans struggle against developers and the infamous Mardis Gras police riot of 1978.

The bibliography at the back of the book is an invaluable resource for labour historians, neatly catalogued as it is into defined historical eras.

It is only after reading Irving and Cahill's book that one realises the extent to which political dissent in Australia has been tamed. I am all too conscious that any short review of this book will not do it justice. It's just too full of delightful gems: rare historical photographs, anecdotes and tales of real working class heroes and heroines. And like any real labour history,

therein lies the book's great power. This is not a book about a city but about the ordinary people who lived, worked and, importantly, agitated within it.