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AUSTRALIA

Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

Volume 10
Issue 1 *Illawarra Unity*

Article 12

2010

Jim Hagan - A Personal Memoir

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Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Glen, Jim Hagan - A Personal Memoir, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 10(1), 2010, 81-84.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol10/iss1/12>

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Abstract

Jim Hagan joined the History Department at the then Wollongong University College in 1966. Those qualities that he sought to develop in his students were present, however, long before he took up this appointment. And to understand what he did at Wollongong and why, some explanation of his life before Wollongong is important.

Jim Hagan – A Personal Memoir

Glenn Mitchell
University of Wollongong



Jim Hagan, grandson Jasper, Jim Jr and Lois Hagan

Jim Hagan joined the History Department at the then Wollongong University College in 1966. Those qualities that he sought to develop in his students were present, however, long before he took up this appointment. And to understand what he did at Wollongong and why, some explanation of his life before Wollongong is important.

His undergraduate studies at Sydney University saw him critically analyse how History, especially Australian history, could be taught. Not for him the betting market where students took bets on the date in the teaching term when the lecturer would bring the First Fleet through Sydney Heads! History he later argued could and should have far more life and meaning than that exercise. His time at Sydney also radicalised him

– militant action through the Trainee Teachers Association and later the NSW Teachers Federation brought a lifelong commitment to trade unions and to the Australian Labor Party.

He trained as a high school teacher and when the opportunity of doing a doctoral thesis at the Australian National University arose, he left teaching high school students. Teaching did not leave him however. He continued to be vitally interested in the way Australian history could be taught, the ways ideas could bring change to the lives of individuals and society and the importance of strict standards of writing, evidence collecting and presentation and clarity of argument.

These strengths and more Wollongong gained when he took up his teaching appointment in 1966. They never left him and in my last conversation with him a week or so before he passed away, they were all there on show – just as they had been for more than 40 years. He brought also a strong reputation as a published historian. His *Modern History and its Themes* and an earlier high school text on world themes in history had influenced thousands of NSW high school students. And while he would have never quoted Virginia Wolf, he often repeated a version of her dictum that it does not exist until it is written. He wanted your ideas and arguments out there for a wider audience which in turn required a strong command of the English language, its grammar and structural forms.

His time at the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University had a strong impact on him. Here he met and worked with Robin Gollan, Eric Fry, Sid and Noel Butlin and he saw how a strong academic environment, with a good library and archives could bring great academic results. When he came to Wollongong, he found none of this. The library was terrible and there were no archives. The library was so bad that when he taught his English Social History subject he asked students to read Stephen Marcus's book, *The Other Victorians* which challenged and argued a counter-narrative to the popular image of Victorian prudery. To get the book however, you had to leave your library card – after an interview with the librarian – and then you received your copy in a brown paper bag!

So Jim set about changing the library, building an archives and thus laying foundation stones for students who took history. This ambition took some interesting turns. It meant taking on

the narrow arguments of the College technologists who could not see the value in more than one book on a particular topic! It meant many truck trips to the State Library to collect back issues of government publications, unwanted texts and it also meant taking the same truck – which once got stuck and had its canvas cover ripped severely – to collect archives. Wollongong City and Shellharbour Councils provided the beginning of what became a more than useful collection of archival materials. And all the while, that same commitment to teaching standards which he developed in high schools continued.

More books followed his high school history texts– ones on the ACTU, the ALP, edited books on Wollongong and then a master stroke. He convinced several unions to fund doctoral and post-doctorial scholarships for research into their organisations – the BWIU, the MWU, the AWU, Transport Workers and Clothing Union and more.

This alone produced an incredible body of work and scholars who have gone on to produce their own manuscripts and reputations. It was not quite the ANU template and model but still one with impressive results. And, through it all, there was the teaching. His classes were sometimes frightening. He more than once sent a class to the library to do the required reading and the tutorials which followed were tortuous. But they drilled into you a standard and a commitment to excellence. Mind you, some of them were hilarious. It's not every day you have a class to be interrupted by a phone call from a politician – especially during an election campaign when he was a campaign manager!

When Kerr dismissed Whitlam he channelled his anger into first a lecture where he argued the illegality of the dismissal. There followed a campaign for the re-election of Whitlam but it was, of course, to be bitter and disappointing.

He took students on bush walks and impressed all with his knowledge of the Latin names for every plant and when Clutha threatened to construct a jetty and coal loader off Coaldale and Coalcliff, he helped form SCOOP – South Coast Organisations Opposing Pollution – and became an environmental activist.

When he wanted to look at Italian influence in certain unions, he realised he needed to learn Italian. And when he received an ARC Grant to look at labour in the Northern Territory and Malaysia he realised that he would need to revisit

and relearn his undergraduate French to access those archives written in French.

He called on his vast network of former doctoral students and colleagues to work on the two volume work *People and Politics* which looked at every election in NSW from 1856 to 2006. This was a massive undertaking and made a significant contribution to understanding NSW politics.

He kept going right to the end – he was writing, thinking, researching and organising book deals right up to his last day. He successfully melded the line between the private and the public. What he believed in, he taught and researched and what he taught and researched, fed back into those things he believed in. He was an excellent example of that researcher described by C Wright Mills in “On Intellectual Craftsmanship” in his *The Sociological Imagination*. He also maintained that strict standard which every historian should have. And while I never always liked it at the time, I think it is that which I almost miss the most about Jim.