



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2017

A Brush with Weimer

Rowan Cahill

University of Wollongong, rowanc@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

R. Cahill 2017 A Brush with Weimer Radical Sydney/Radical History <http://radicalsdney.blogspot.com.au/p/radical-ruminations.html>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

A Brush with Weimer

Abstract

Forty-eight years ago tonight, it was the night before Pam (1948-2015) and I married, and we were amongst the small number of guests invited to a function to farewell Associate Professor Ernest K. Bramsted (1901-1978) as he retired from Sydney University and prepared to return to the UK where he had citizenship. He had come to Sydney University in 1952, but was now deemed to have reached his use-by date. As it turned out, he still had a couple of books in him, and some teaching gigs.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

R. Cahill 2017 A Brush with Weimer Radical Sydney/Radical History <http://radical-sydney.blogspot.com.au/p/radical-ruminations.html>

A BRUSH WITH WEIMAR*

by

Rowan Cahill

Forty-eight years ago tonight, it was the night before Pam (1948-2015) and I married, and we were amongst the small number of guests invited to a function to farewell Associate Professor Ernest K. Bramsted (1901-1978) as he retired from Sydney University and prepared to return to the UK where he had citizenship.ⁱ He had come to Sydney University in 1952, but was now deemed to have reached his use-by date. As it turned out, he still had a couple of books in him, and some teaching gigs.

Bramsted had been one of my teachers during my undergraduate years at Sydney University (1964-68), and had helped supervise my Honours work in 1968. We had become close during this time, and had had many discussions.....about history, socialism, utopias, propaganda, rebellion, dissent, my own radical activities, morality, responsibility...

Born in Germany into a liberal Jewish tradition, Bramsted had contributed to the socialist press in the early years of the Weimer Republic, gained a doctorate from the University of Berlin (1926), and a second at the University of London (1936), this latter thesis, with its mix of sociology, history, and literature, first published in 1937 as *Aristocracy and the Middle-Classes in Germany: Social Types in German Literature 1830-1900* (republished in 1964). Bramsted's academic mentor and influence was the pioneer sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893-1947), and he later co-edited a collection of Mannheim's last writings, *Freedom, Power, and Democratic Planning* (1951).

A victim of, and refugee from, the anti-semitism unleashed by Hitler's 1933 Enabling Act, Bramsted moved to Holland, then Britain, and during WW11 worked in counter-propaganda for the BBC, and later in secret war work for the Foreign Office in 'political intelligence'. Post-war he worked in Berlin on the transfer of Nazi documents into the public realm, and gained an international reputation as a critical authority on propaganda and its coercive and shaping roles through the close case study of Joseph Goebbels, whose work he had monitored as part of his war work. Bramsted was a religious person and part of the Unitarian Church, his theological strand rejecting the notion of 'original sin', locating the genesis of evil/sin within the human being and the choices each one of us makes.

From tutorials and one-to-one discussions, through the haze of his yellow stained fingers chain smoking and quietly pointed challenging Germanic accented English, I absorbed a lot from Bramsted.....about the history of ideas, about the roles of intellectuals in society and history, about the roles of fear and intimidation in controlling society, about the legitimacy of revolution, about events like the advent of Nazism and the Holocaust not being historical abnormalities but the results of human actions and inactions, with the emphasis on the latter, and that mass society is always about individuals, and at any time, individuals can have agency and it is compliance/complicity or otherwise that counts. Metaphysically/historically, Evil is something each of us helps along, or counters.

There was only a handful of us young people at Bramsted's function, and Pam and I left early, returning to our respective parental homes. On the morrow we would marry and begin a new life together.....there was conscription and a related war to end; authorities, with significant jail-time in mind for me, to be thwarted; and a world to win.....and individuals had agency, particularly if they organised.....for better or for worse, and until death did us part, chances were that life was probably always going to be a bit different.

Rowan Cahill

University of Wollongong

*First published 16 May 2017 on the 'Radical Ruminations' page of the *Radical Sydney/Radical History* blog <<http://radicalsdney.blogspot.com.au>>

ⁱ For a biographical overview of Bramsted see John Hooper, 'Ernest K. Bramsted (1901-1987): a European historian in Germany, England and Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Volume 31, Issue 3, December 1985, pp. 397-407.