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Frontiers of Labor: 5th National Labour History Conference Perth, October 2–4 1997.

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Frontiers of Labor: 5th National Labour History Conference Perth, October 2–4 1997.

Abstract

"I don't come from a University, I'm one of those community/trade union/political activists with an interest in Labor History": this was my catch cry as I was approached by different people at the Conference. I should explain further that this Conference was, as I understand it, a 'typical university' conference, very unlike the nursing conferences I am used to. Nursing conferences have drug companies paying for the lunches, they are always held in conference rooms in hotels and everyone is dressed in suits; it's all very formal and usually all women. This one was informal, with about 150 people, lots of them men, held in the Alexander Library Theatre and in the surrounding buildings, with a culture all of its own, i.e., academics and aspiring academics giving papers on left-wing issues, with a number of 'other' people. I was part of the 'other' people.

FRONTIERS OF LABOR

**5th National Labour History Conference
Perth, October 2–4 1997.**

A Report by Sally Quilter

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This one was informal, with about 150 people, lots of them men, held in the Alexander Library Theatre and in the surrounding buildings, with a culture all of its own, i.e., academics and aspiring academics giving papers on left-wing issues, with a number of ‘other’ people. I was part of the ‘other’ people.

The tensions between the academics and the ‘other’ people who are interested in Labor History and perhaps are the subjects of the academics is fascinating. Nevertheless I would have to say that as a group of human beings I would prefer to be stuck on a desert island with the academics rather than most of the Labor parliamentarians and Trade Union officials that I know!

The Conference papers were varied, ranging in topics from women’s involvement in politics to Rhetoric and Representations of Frontiers (a delightful introduction, for someone like me, to the use of photographs and how their use can colour the representation of a history or misrepresent history) through to workshops on oral history, union histories, papers on law and history, labor intellectuals, the Cold War in Australia, education ... I could go on, but as you can see it was very eclectic. And it is this variety that made the Conference interesting.

But... of the papers that I went to, the ones that lived for me

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were the ones where the presenter was able to create a feeling of intimate knowledge of the person or issue, with an analysis that identified the issue or person within the context of Australian society at the time. I am not sure whether this is because of my background in the social sciences or the papers I chose to listen to.

The Conference dinner was held in Perth's Concert Hall dining area, which was very pleasant; the food was good and the wine excellent.

Perhaps it was the wine, but there seemed to be a paralysis amongst the voting members of the Society when a motion was put to them about the closure of the Noel Butlin Archives in Canberra as a cost-cutting measure. These archives are the main repository for Business and Labour records in Australia, and the ANU's specialisation in this area is the result of a long-standing agreement amongst all Australian archives over areas of specialisation.

Finally, after much debate, a union member proposed a motion which was endorsed. The motion condemned the ANU's proposed desertion of its responsibilities to historical research and the Australian community, and threatened to place a ban on Australian Labour History Society members examining higher degree theses from the ANU.

On the way to the walk around Fremantle we passed the Workers' Embassy established to highlight third-wave legislation in Industrial Relations. It had become a focus for many community projects including building a garden on site. The Perth Branch and the Illawarra Branch seem to have some similarities in their involvement with the community.

During the Fremantle walk the local unionists who were our guides were superb. I was able to chat to the Miscos' delegate who was meeting the next day with some other comrades I had fought some battles with, and I was able to send my greetings to them.

The buildings in Fremantle may be a source of income from tourism for the capitalists, but it is the workers' history that always hits a cord in peoples' hearts!!

The Perth Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labor History had worked hard to provide excellent accommodation (lucky Perth to have such a fine building as the Library) for the workshops/presenters. However, I think the Illawarra can match Perth in 1999 when we have the Conference down here.