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"Radical history and rebel voices"

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"Radical history and rebel voices"

Abstract

Book review of:

Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill. *Radical Sydney: Places, Portraits and Unruly Episodes*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010. 384 pp. A\$39.95. ISBN 9781742230931

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ancestors. Awareness is a step towards understanding, healing, and hoping for a future that has more equality in legal systems, land rights, and justice.

The challenges in Australia are similar to those in other parts of the world that have experienced colonization. Our neighbors' ancestors may have attempted to annihilate our ancestors and their delicate and sacred ties to country, but where does that leave us as modern people? Australia is a *neo-colonial* zone, one that has never ceded its invasion, but now seeks to live with laws that still favor the privileged colonizers. Meanwhile, land suffers, people suffer, and the indigenous ways of knowing wait for brighter moments when more children speak languages that bear timeless bonds to place, and those places wait for people to reconnect and find a way to heal symbiotically.

The modern world is a place as full of despair as it is of hope. Will social ills continue to dominate indigenous societies, or will the people recover? Will the landscape become barren and polluted, or will it no longer be lonesome for its people? Indeed, as Morgan notes, "The Indigenous concept of country is difficult for many people to grasp. Some people see it as involving considerations of land and territory, while others see it as something to do with geography and the notion of a nation state" (203). This concept is much more complex and organic, and we will continue to come closer to understanding it as more books like this one become read, understood, taught, and respected.

SOCIAL HISTORY

"Radical history and rebel voices"

Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill.
Radical Sydney: Places, Portraits and Unruly Episodes. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010. 384 pp. A\$39.95. ISBN 9781742230931

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A popular saying in Australia insists that nothing ever happens in this coun-

try, that there is simply too much sports on for people to have time for a revolution. Another myth is that Australia is a classless society, comfortably egalitarian, where politicians and multi-millionaire businessmen are "mates" with carpenters and shopkeepers. *Radical Sydney*, the intriguing new book by historians Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill, refutes all of these ideas with convincing ferocity. In 47 short chapters they present a history of Australia that is far less placid, easy-going, and peaceful than the official narrative will have us believe. They start at the beginning, with Lieutenant William Dawes, a First Fleet officer, who they reveal to be much more than a dispassionate astronomer. Dawes, also a passionate linguist, used part of his free time to get close and personal with local Aboriginals, one young woman in particular. In 1790, this background brought him into direct confrontation with Governor Arthur Philip. Philip, angry at the spearing of a convict employed as his personal gamekeeper, wanted Dawes to head a punitive expedition against the Aboriginals, something Irving and Cahill call "an exercise in state terrorism" (8). First Dawes refused, then was cajoled into participating, but later regretted his involvement so much that he told his commander that he "would never obey a similar order in the future" (10). Philip was furious, demanded an apology and when Dawes refused, forced the young officer to leave Australia.

Dawes, Irving and Cahill maintain, was only the first in a long line of (would-be) Australians to say "no" to the powers that be. To support this premise, *Radical Sydney* takes its readers on a journey through the city, past places where defiant people took up arms, often literally, against their rulers. Irving and Cahill tell us, in clear and persuasive prose, about the "rebellion" (16) of Irish convicts in 1804, ending in the execution of its leaders, one of them "strung from the staircase of a government store in the Hawkesbury settlement" (18). Rather than an "oddity" in Australian history, the event was a "desperate expression of important ideas," the writers insist, "testament to the tenacious human spirit of resistance

against oppression" (20). From other examples of convict opposition *Radical Sydney* moves into accounts of early trade unionism, Chartism, and working-class attempts to "overturn the social order," as a newspaper of the time proclaimed (40). We meet writers, soldiers, wharfies, politicians, immigrants, Aboriginals, Chinese, and bookshop owners, all passionately motivated to change the world, starting with Australia. Especially in the 19th century their ideas were heavily influenced by the French revolution, but the writers make it very clear that the "tricolour ribbon" was worn on a "cabbage tree hat," a quintessential "Indigenous symbol of resistance," that was emerging as "a symbol of working-class power": "The message was clear: popular resistance by workers was an Australian tradition, too" (58-9).

Irving and Cahill are careful not to limit their descriptions of Sydney radicalism to the left side of the political spectrum. Apart from pacifists, democrats, unionists, gays, students, and Communists, readers are also confronted with the sordid story of Australian fascism and its fellow travelers, from The King and Empire Alliance in 1916, which stored "arms and ammunition" in "disused railway tunnels," ready for use "against the Bolsheviks and Sinn Feiners if they embarked on revolution" (154), to future PM Robert Menzies, who "returned from a tour of Nazi Germany [in 1938] praising what he had seen" (223).

In their introductory chapter, the authors explain the reason for their undertaking. Sydney, they say, is "a city of disappearances," where "the present annihilates the past and sweet-talks the future, a city in which memories can be short." Its political and commercial chiefs work hard at presenting the harbor city as a glamorous (tourist) destination, and there is no place for its "combustible" back story (1). Irving and Cahill want to set the record straight, "enable some rebel voices to be heard again" and "restore clamour and disturbance to politics" (2). Modern-day Australians need to know, they feel, that their biggest city has a history of "Black

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Power, resident action, sexual liberation and cultural rebellion" (6). In an essay published on the *Radical Sydney* blog, Cahill calls his way of academic investigation "radical history" (<http://radical-sydney.blogspot.com/p/radical-history.html>). This way of studying of and writing about history "has an emancipatory dimension"; it moves "people to act" by "showing that change is possible, that apparently powerless or humble organisations and people can overcome apparently insurmountable odd." By telling stories about "dissenting traditions" it displays "not what is inevitable, but what could and might be" in the future as well. According to Cahill, "the mission of radical historians is to confront and contest the consensus view of the Australian past and its ideological underpinnings" by focusing on what has been "sidelined, ignored and 'forgotten.'" From this perspective, *Radical Sydney* is not just a fascinating alternative look at a part of Australia's history. It is also a timely argument in a discussion that is raging in newspapers in the country at the moment. In its preparation of a new National Curriculum, the Australian government has run into some trouble with members of the Opposition. The battleground is the proposed teaching of "controversies" surrounding Australia's role at Gallipoli and its commemoration on Anzac Day. "High school history is not the place to start questioning" issues like that, is the opinion of Opposition education spokesman Adrian Piccoli. I suspect that Irving and Cahill would vehemently disagree, and so do I. History needs to be at the frontline of debates about a nation's myths and narratives, and students have to know that these accounts are never neutral, but always a matter of voice and perspective. To underscore this point, the Australian government could do worse than incorporate a book like *Radical Sydney* into its new Curriculum. As an extra bonus, it would engage and entertain students as well, and academic writing like that is rare enough as it is.

Intimate postcards of Australia

Wendy Law Suart. *With Bags and Swags: Around Australia in the Forties*. Dingo Books, UK, 2008. Maps by Peter Suart; illustrations by Malika Favre. 408 pp. £20. ISBN 9780955603815

Sean Scarisbrick
Youngstown, New York

With Bags and Swags is an engaging record of Wendy Law Suart's three-year journey around post-war Australia with her friend Shirley Duncan. In this memoir, Suart has effectively created an intimate series of postcards. They are snapshot images strung together across that period of Australia's history which is on the cusp of fading from living memory, and she has done so with the romantically archaic native voice that seems endemic in expatriates long since departed from their native shores.

As they were traveling the bush with their bikes, those they met often expected a loyalty to that mode of transport not shared by the "girls," as Suart refers to Duncan and herself. "We don't set ourselves up as cyclists or record-breakers. We're merely tourists. If we had one, we'd go by car. But we haven't. So it's bikes. But if we can hitchhike, so much the better."

The journey that Suart and "Dunc" took on their Malvern Stars was one with, she writes, "everything—and nothing—in front of us," and it appears in these pages as indiscriminate of purpose as the idea of everything and nothing suggests. As they pushed on from one place to another, they seemed to breathe deeply the words of Constantine Cavafy from his poem *Ithaca*:

Pray that the road is long.
That the summer mornings are many,
when,
with such pleasure, with such joy
you will enter ports seen for the first
time;

"The road is long"—Suart repeatedly returns to the notion of what she insists was, for 1945, a very peculiar en-

deavor: two young women heading around the country on bikes. They did not have much of a plan: head north to Queensland, work where and when they could to support themselves, and be back home in about six months.

As things happened, the girls had misjudged the size of their nation, and the trip took three years. After an initial loop of Tasmania they headed north through Victoria, New South Wales and up as far as north Queensland. From there they headed across to Darwin, south to Adelaide, and then over to Perth and Carnarvon. Finally, they headed back across the Nullarbor, returning to Melbourne in 1948.

From the outset, the trip garnered what seems an improbably large amount of popular attention, even taking into account their repeated and active engagement with the press—searching them out as they rolled into town, encouraging photo ops, etc. This early hunger for publicity served them well, for people often knew they were coming, or at the very least traveling, and that they might turn up in their district, in their country town. And those people in turn often offered hospitality, rides, and work as they traversed the country.

Their odyssey is the stuff of legend. From hitching rides on the back of trucks over atrocious Snowy Mountain roads to descending on ropes into a Nullarbor sinkhole, and from there into a frigid cave to swim in a subterranean lake, Suart paints a vivid picture of an Australia populated by the generally generous and almost invariably interesting. Along the way they adopted a dog, Pete, who was at home with them across the landscape in a wooden Nestle box strapped to the handlebars.

What first drew me to Suart's book was its obvious parallel with Ernestine Hill's classic of Australian travel literature, *The Great Australian Loneliness*. Suart and Duncan set out less than a decade after the 1937 publishing of Hill's book and were obviously so inspired by it that Suart went so far as borrowing the title of Hill's book for a chapter of her own.

Suart's story made me want to call my Australian grandmother to verify if this