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A blizzard from Oz

Rowan Cahill

University of Wollongong, rowanc@uow.edu.au

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A blizzard from Oz

Abstract

On April Fools' Day 1963, the first issue of the Sydney-based satirical journal Oz went on sale. The first print-run of 6000 copies sold within three hours, and a second printing followed. The sixteen pages of black-and-white letterpress sold for 1/3d. Produced on a shoestring budget, it was the work of three young editors (Richard Neville, Martin Sharp, Richard Walsh), all with backgrounds in university student publications. At its height, Oz achieved a circulation of 40,000.

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A Blizzard from OZ

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(13 August)

On April Fools' Day 1963, the first issue of the Sydney-based satirical journal *Oz* went on sale. The first print-run of 6000 copies sold within three hours, and a second printing followed. The sixteen pages of black-and-white letterpress sold for 1/3d. Produced on a shoestring budget, it was the work of three young editors (Richard Neville, Martin Sharp, Richard Walsh), all with backgrounds in university student publications. At its height, *Oz* achieved a circulation of 40,000.

Flush with funds from my weekend job as a caddy on the local golf course, I bought my copy on a railway station on my way to school, charmed into a purchase by a young female university student, one of many sellers who targeted Sydney's streets and railway stations that morning.

At the time I was in my final year of high school. The Leaving Certificate was about seven months away, and conscription and the Vietnam War a couple of years down the track. But I did not know about that then, nor that I was headed for a role as an anti-war activist, draft-resister, and an enemy of the state, my activities dutifully recorded by the anal-retentives in the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. That was all in the future, and in April 1963 I was a schoolboy, a rebel-in-waiting, my politics and rebellion restless in puberty.

In those conservative Cold War days of the early 1960s, the days of Prime Minister Menzies and bowing and curtsying and grovelling to Lords and Ladies and Royals, when trade unions were enemies and communists the scum of the earth and Mother England the aspirational centre of the Australian universe and DH Lawrence was dirty and films were cut to within an inch of their lives and saying boo to a mouse was tantamount to treason, *Oz* came as a gust ... no, a gale ... no, a blizzard of fresh air.

My mates and I shared *Oz* communally in the playground that day, and subsequently, in far corners of the school, away from the censorious prowlings of the Principal and his tight toadies, who were always on the lookout for forbidden paperbacks and 'dirty' magazines: 'Get to my office, son ... you'll get six of the best.'

The targets of *Oz* were many: everything from the conservative politics of the Menzies government, to the Australian love affair with royalty, to the prudish sexual mores of contemporary society, to the repressive censorship regime that sought to suffocate the national culture, to the racism that coursed through White Australia, to criminalities within the NSW police force and the corrupt government of the thuggish NSW (Liberal) Premier Bob Askin.

Authorities tried to silence the *Oz* crew and their publisher with fines and jail sentences, but there were pro bono lawyers on hand with an eye to principles and headlines and an interest in helping Australia engage with the modern world without having to go overseas to do so. *Oz* managed to run seven years (41 issues), before its final issues in 1969.

By then, *Oz* had done its job, though its technically innovative and politically robust offspring London *Oz* (1967–1973), continued to create cultural, publishing, and legal history. It was established when Neville and Sharp (Art Director) set up shop in London, joining forces with co-editors Felix Dennis and Jim Anderson. The London incarnation had a huge influence internationally on the underground and alternative press, in some estimations second only to *The Village Voice* in New York.

The national culture of Australia was changing, as were the voters who had kept conservative political forces in power since late 1949. Conscription and the Vietnam War had generated social movements that would transform Australian society, and the tsunami of alternative literatures that was part of this, and the excitements and urgencies of protest and working for social change, made the satiric provocations of Sydney's *Oz* seem timid and tired.

That said, *Oz* was part of my radicalisation, demonstrating the power of satire and showing that words could be bullets and that little publications could have an effect beyond their small circulation. At school, I tried to contribute to *Oz*, but my efforts were puerile: I was still a kid, and my politics and life-experiences were in the shallows.

Personally, I am indebted to *Oz* and it is with great pleasure I note that the University of Wollongong Library (NSW) has digitised the entire run of Sydney's *Oz*, and it is now available online with open access. Browse, joy, and note how well some of the satire holds up in today's world of Abbotonian Australia.

Rowan Cahill is a sessional teaching academic at the University of Wollongong, and blogs at <http://www.radicalsydney.blogspot.com.au>.