ROWAN CAHILL

Another View of the Sixties

I ENJOYED John Herouvim’s comments on the Sixties (Overland 126), an era ill served in print; as he points out Seizures of Youth by Gerster and Bassett does little except perpetuate media and advertising myths about the period.

One myth is that being a radical in the Sixties was easy, a simple adolescent role one fashionably slipped into. As one of the radical ‘leaders’ of that era, variously arrested, jailed, spied upon, villified in NCC literature and The Bulletin, etc, this role-playing thesis is a vast distortion.

For a start, radicalisation tended to be a process, not an instant conversion. For me, it began in a NSW State secondary school between 1958 and 1963, courtesy of some caring and - for their time - radical teachers (amongst them a Communist and an Andersonian), and a humanities curriculum that in their hands encouraged questioning and wide (if precocious) extra-curricular reading (e.g., Orwell, Huxley, Freud, Anderson, Russell and A. D. Hope), encouragement that was not in accord with the attitudes of my parents, nor the prevailing spirit of the Menzies era.

In Leaving Certificate English I got a solid dose of the Romantics, a glimpse of the world of Jacobin intellectual circles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and, from this, an inkling that protest and rebellion were perhaps okay. The ‘new’ History syllabus aimed at linking the social, economic and political in the context of world history from 1750 onwards. From this viewpoint I arrived at the idea that revolution was maybe a historical necessity and also found - in spite of Empire/Commonwealth Day and ‘God Save the Queen’ it was hard to be in love with imperialism.

I left school with real, if basic, intellectual tools and with a belief that life could be understood and that it was possible to make sense out of bewilderment.

Data. I left, too, with the knowledge that not everything passed on as historical fact and wisdom was what it claimed to be. Later, Sydney University, being conscripted and the Vietnam War merely continued and accelerated a process that had already begun.

The “protest as an adolescent fashion” thesis assumes a couple of things. As Herouvim points out, first “that there was really nothing for anyone to get steamed up about”. Forget the tragedy that was the Vietnam War, forget conscription, and the lies and distortions peddled by Australian politicians and a tame press. This modish and shallow view also assumes that protest was easy, that there were not family divisions, no tension or bitterness, and that ‘little things’ – such as the Army’s brutal treatment (torture?) of anti-conscriptionist Simon Townsend – perhaps did not occur at all.

The adolescent ‘fashion’ idea also assumes that Australia in the 1950s was some sort of golden-age paradise, so come the 1960s there wasn’t much to worry about. Let’s simply forget about censorship in the Fifties, and the Cold War and its crippling impact on intellectual life; also the cringing fear of Asia and an era of government which cultivated the idea that an individual’s democratic responsibility ended at the ballot box. And, while we’re about it, let’s also forget the “nowhere land” concept of our nation – one that held that we had too little past to bother understanding, little culture to speak of, and a future understood only in terms of powerful-friend politics.

To some extent – thought not with any sense of regret – I regard my radical youth as a ‘lost youth’, in the sense that I missed out on a lot of the hedonism associated with being young. In the mid-to late-Sixties I had a sense of being hunted, as the military authorities chased me for failing to attend medical tests, and the State authorities prosecuted me for my role as publisher of the student journal honi soit. Brief and claustrophobic experiences of jail did not make the prospect of a prison term attractive, and martyrdom was not high on my psychological and political agenda.

Looking back on the 1950s and 1960s, Australia now seems like another country. But we should never forget the stultifying conservatism of Australia that the student revolt played a part (and I emphasise part, for it was only a part) in helping bring the curtain down upon. Gone forever now (one hopes) is that Cold War Australia where it was okay to conduct nuclear experiments on Aborigines and servicemen, where prime ministers played toady courtier to visiting royalty; that era in which Communists were ‘Reds’ and the Yellow Peril was about to engulf us all; when America was God and it was patriotic to be subservient to U.S. strategic and economic interests; and when newspaper editorialists spewed crude anti-laborism, and ASIO mobilised to prevent the likes of Zelman Cowen, Alan Walker, Jimmy Carruthers, Lloyd Rees, Chips Rafferty and Manning Clark from setting the tumblears rolling. It seems another world, too, in which I tentatively committed my first crime against the State, purchasing the banned 1961 Penguin The Trial of Lady Chatterly.

Herouvim is right in pointing out that it is a myth that Sixties radicals have abandoned their radicalism. Sure, some have. (Scratch an economic rationalist these days and you are likely to find an ex-Marxist!) But it has not been a blanket sell-out; like John, I believe there are a lot of Sixties values largely intact all over the place and, in my family at least, the indications are that these have been passed on.

In a recent interview (Rolling Stone,
September 1992) Noam Chomsky made clear why people want to trivialise and marginalise the Sixties. He argues that the Sixties were a time when people were not apathetic and passive, and leadership was not a top-down imposed phenomenon — when ordinary people came to believe that they could change things, and even tried to do so. As he went on to point out:

We are (now) meant to think of popular movements as things that grow out of individual leadership and individual charisma. The reason we are meant to think that is that it disempowers people. It makes them think they can’t do anything for themselves.

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Kurt Wiese Drawings in Mitchell

JOAN CLARKE

[Imtraud Petersson wrote in Overland 126 (Autumn, 1992) about Kurt Wiese (1887–1974) and his little known Australian books and illustrations. The world famous illustrator (Bambi etc) was interned in Australia 1916–1919.]

When researching for my biography Max Herz: Surgeon Extraordinary (APCOL, 1976) I first discovered Kurt Wiese. Herz and Wiese were fellow internees at Trial Bay from 1915 to 1918. When Herz established his Deutsches Theater inside the old gaol, producing works by leading German dramatists and some by Ibsen, Pinero and Shaw, Wiese not only produced posters for each play but often participated in the productions.

In my book on Herz are photographs of some of Wiese’s posters and of his other delightful drawings recording the activities of the Trial Bay internees. These were reproduced from Wiese’s original artwork which he gave to his good friend Dr Herz prior to his repatriation to Germany. They are now amongst the Max Herz papers in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, and are probably the only original Wiese drawings in Australia.

While I knew that Wiese had later become a successful artist in the United States, I did not know about his children’s books. For that information I am most grateful to Dr Petersson, and, of course, to Overland.

A Winter’s Saturday Afternoon in Melbourne

In an old masonic hall
I saw a burn upon a wall
I saw its mournful, aimless stare
And saw that life was cold and bare

From Michael Leunig’s wonderful A Bunch of Poesy (Angus & Robertson, 116.65) a collection of over 60 poems with accompanying cartoons gathered from Leunig’s 22 years with the Age and with Nation Review. Seven collections of Leunig’s drawings and two books of his poems have been published but this piece of magic, we think, his first hardback.