RADICAL SYDNEY
PLACES, PORTRAITS AND UNRULY EPISODES
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TERRY IRVING AND ROWAN CAHILL

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RADICAL SYDNEY

The authors met at the University of Sydney in the 1960s and have worked together on historical projects since. In various capacities - academic (Irving), freelance journalist (Cahill) - and as independent scholars, the authors have collectively spent decades researching, and writing about, aspects of Australia's radical and dissident past, at times recording it first-hand, and participating in its making.

Radical educationist and historian Dr Terry Irving taught history and politics at the University of Sydney. He was one of the founders of the Free University (Sydney) in the 1960s and a prominent New Left figure in the labour history movement. Continuing the tradition of radical history found in the work of Gordon Childe, Brian Fitzpatrick and Bert Evatt, he writes about class analysis, youth politics, labour intellectuals, and radical democracy. His most recent book is The Southern Tree of Liberty (2006). He is currently Visiting Professorial Fellow at the University of Wollongong.

Rowan Cahill was prominent in the anti-war, student, and New Left movements during the 1960s and early 1970s. He has worked as a teacher, freelance writer, agricultural labourer, and for the trade union movement as a journalist, historian and rank-and-file activist. Currently a part-time academic at the University of Wollongong, he has published extensively in labour movement, radical and academic publications. His most recent book (as co-editor) is A Turbulent Decade: Social Protest Movements and the Labour Movement, 1965–1975 (2005).
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INTRODUCTION

A DIFFERENT SYDNEY

Sydney is variously promoted to the world by commercial and political PR-spinners as ‘a cosmopolitan city’, ‘a global city’, ‘an economic powerhouse’, ‘the business gateway to Australia’. In a forest of glossy publications and on a deluge of websites, attendant photographs reduce the city to the Opera House, the Harbour Bridge, and the concrete and glass eyries of the Central Business District, all drenched in sunlight and framed by the digitally enhanced blues of Sydney’s harbour and sky.

True in part, but it is also a city of disappearances. As Marele Day’s Claudia Valentine observed in The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender (1988), the city sometimes looks ‘like a huge building site’ where the present annihilates the past and sweet-talks the future, a city in which memories can be short. Post-World War II, a combination of road, petrol, automobile and development interests coalesced to variously rip out people-friendly infrastructures and ruthlessly, at times corruptly, develop the city skywards, a carte blanche obliteration of the past and the creation of a canyon environment with arteries that would later choke. It was a process of ‘forgetting’, one halted and forced into compromise only by the Green Bans movement of the 1970s, with the result that uneasy dialogues continue, between the present and the future, between memory and forgetting.

Beyond postcard Sydney is a city its rulers are not fond of. We get a glimpse of it in the media-created images of today’s Redfern, western Sydney, and the ‘Shire’, all of which are combustible, unpredictable places, with social problems and uncertain voting. Stigmatised when
they are not the objects of condescending attention, the people of this other Sydney are rarely heard from. Many of them actually have a positive view of the city they inhabit. They see it as a place of challenge and opportunity, where new ideas can be tested, politics invigorated, power contested.

This book is about the history of that other Sydney, as both a place on a map and a product of the radical imagination. Ranging from the convict era through to the recent past, we provide glimpses of lives and stories that have largely been marginalised or ignored in mainstream accounts of the city. We reconstruct sites of a politics that challenged the political elites and dominant ideologies of their day, and enable some rebel voices to be heard again. We restore clamour and disturbance to politics, refusing to ignore the violence underlying the social order, violence that is actual as well as threatened, overt as well as covert, violence which, when not employed by the state and its supporters, is regarded as a political aberration.

In the mainstream of white, masculine, middle-class history, the voices of Aboriginal fighters, convict poets, feminist journalists, democratic agitators, bohemian dreamers, and revolutionaries are rarely heard. As historian Eric Fry once explained (Rebels & Radicals, 1983), the past and the present involve contradictory and conflicting social/historical forces; rebels and radicals are indispensable agents, helping shape the future by opposing and restricting society’s rulers, paving the way for social change, opening doors to reformers, giving birth to what, at the time, might appear ‘unthinkable’. And in the process, empowering themselves and others.

Sydney is a huge geographical and demographic entity. It is the largest city in Australia, its metropolitan area covering some 12,000 square kilometres, and has a population of about 4.3 million people living in over 640 suburbs (as determined by postal authorities), administered as 40 local government areas. Given these statistics, and the millions of people who have lived in the area over time, it stands to reason that the extent of radical Sydney is vast, compelling choice when it comes to writing its history. It is certainly more than the small canon of individuals, organisations and ideas preferred by some historians, more than the limited geography we deal with, and more than the sampling of stories
we have chosen to recover from what has been allowed to drop through the cracks of history.

In the social imagination of the city’s rulers, the negative image of radical Sydney has changed little over time. From 1850, when a Society for the Protection of Life and Property was formed, the respectable and propertied citizens have imagined the ‘other’ Sydney as a bubbling stew of discontent. Constantly worried about crime and the disrespectful behaviour of Cabbage Tree Hat mobs, larrikin pushes and bodgie gangs, Sydney’s rulers feared most of all the onset of political crisis, when the mob, be it organised by Irish disloyalists, Labor demagogues or Communist agitators, would break out of its ghetto slums and enclaves and threaten the social order.

The fear of Sydney’s menacing ‘other’ has left its traces in the buildings whose function is to defend law and order. After the convict uprising at Vinegar Hill in 1804, Governor Philip King ordered the construction of Fort Phillip at Millers Point, to protect the city. He was worried as much by the seditious Irish who were already present as by an unlikely future French invasion. Over the next century, in gaols and courthouses, the law was used not only to resist the tides of criminality but also, as delinquency and radical activity increased, to mop up the spillage of failed attempts at social control. The military too would play a part, as its Commanding Officer recognised in 1892 when he recommended the formation of a flying column to combat militant trade unionists. He wrote from the imposing Victoria Barracks at Paddington, which had been completed in the 1870s. It was both the headquarters of imperial military power in the colony and a base from which to confront internal civil disruption; its intimidating gun-slits overlooked the working-class area to the south and east of the business centre of the city.

From the 1880s to the 1950s, the radical Sydney we deal with remained virtually unchanged, a large and explosive space of marginalised ideas and peripheral places surrounding the centre of the city, a subversive and threatening arc of overcrowded working-class suburbs, bohemian neighbourhoods, dissident politics and contentious action. Starting in The Rocks, we can trace the inner ring of radical Sydney along the waterfront’s notorious ‘hungry mile’ south to Darling Harbour. Our route takes in the warehouses of Pyrmont and the tenements
of Ultimo and Chippendale, then turns across the southern end of the city through the factories of Darlington and the railway yards of Redfern, before swinging north through Surry Hills and Darlington to the waterfront again at Woolloomooloo, on the eastern side of the city.

As Sydney grew, this semicircle broadened to take in adjoining suburbs: west to Balmain and Leichhardt, southwest through Sydenham and Marrickville to Bankstown, south to Botany and east to Paddington. Partly enclosed by the arc, always within its menacing reach, was official and commercial Sydney, a city of substantial and imposing buildings where government decisions were made and business power was concentrated. Here were the symbolic buildings of church and state – the Town Hall, the cathedrals, Government House and Parliament. Close by were the engine rooms of capitalism – the head offices of the great trading companies, the banks and finance houses, the stock exchange, the newspaper editorial rooms, and the retail emporia. Here too were the open spaces where people could recognise each other as citizens, mingling in democratic leisure along the harbour shore, in the public gardens and on the streets as they made their way to theatres and hotels.

These public spaces were important to radical Sydney. The working people of Sydney had been claiming their rights as citizens for 100 years or more, so they naturally wanted their chance to enjoy its pleasures. More than that, they wanted to demonstrate the only kind of power they had, the power of numbers. That is why the streets of the city became political battlefields. Getting a crowd together was a central tactic of electoral politics from the 1840s until long after the introduction of the secret ballot; radical agitators used people power as a weapon, particularly if the action occurred at a site of symbolic importance to the governing elites. When the labour movement was formed, its annual procession made a similar point, marching with banners of craft pride and class solidarity through the main streets of the city, ostentatiously passing sites such as the Town Hall and Parliament.

The need to express radical ideas on the streets was especially important because the commercial daily newspapers were closed to radicals. Street-corner meetings were characteristic of radical politics, and those held in the city were particularly valued because so much effort was needed to stage them in the face of the determination of
the police and city authorities to prevent, or at least strictly regulate, them. From the perspective of the government, a safety valve already existed in the Sunday afternoon speakers' corner in the Domain. Here as well, the impact of a wave of organised radicalism in the 1880s was felt, transforming the Domain from desultory crankiness into a continuing, vital democratic forum. Crowds were regular and large, in times of crisis reaching over 100,000.

One such crisis was during World War I, when the federal Labor government tried to introduce conscription but was twice defeated at referenda. Christian socialist Lewis Rodd, growing up in Surry Hills at this time, was just emerging into political awareness. In his memoir of these years (A Gentle Shipwreck, 1975) he recalled his political education in the Domain and the great arc of radical Sydney that it served. On Sundays, with his older brother, he would join the crowd walking down Oxford Street:

It was not so much a pleasant Sunday afternoon stroll as an army on the march, an army of men and women, bitter, disillusioned, most of them elderly, whose political idols, the Holmans and the Hugheses, had proved to have feet of brass ... At the corner of Hyde Park where the new Wentworth Avenue joined with College Street came another steadily marching, almost silent group from Ultimo, Glebe and Redfern. More straggled across Hyde Park and at the Domain gates joined with two more, one surging up from Woolloomooloo and the other coming across the city from the Rocks.

In many accounts of Sydney's history, the Domain is an iconic, sentimental, political favourite, forming both part of a spatial/visual representation of democracy and proof of its existence; the eccentric, cranky, agitational crucible at one end of Macquarie Street, within strolling distance of both Parliament, citadel of the lawmakers, and the courts, entrusted with arbiting and enforcing those laws. However, for the Sunday army of people trooping in to the Domain from all points across the city, politically angry, disillusioned, bitter people, the grist of radical Sydney, democracy was a response to lived, daily experience, a response more pervasive and extensive than a weekly gathering in one officially sanctioned safety valve.
Although the state and business stamped their authority on the city by making it the centre of their operations, radicals defined a different political zone in Sydney, a space where a tradition of challenging ruling power took hold. After two centuries, the shape of radical Sydney has hardly altered. The Domain, it is true, has succumbed to the banalities of corporate entertainment, but the new middle-class radicals who appeared in the 1970s and 1980s slipped easily into the transgressive space created by their working-class and bohemian predecessors. The rise of mass media, itself also exploited vigorously by the new middle-class radicals, has not disrupted this pattern of resistance, for it was in the central business district, and in Darlington, Redfern, Paddington, Kings Cross, Glebe and other inner suburbs where radicals had dissented and defied since the 1840s, that the activists of Black Power, resident action, sexual liberation, cultural rebellion, nuclear disarmament, green bans and peace have raised their banners, eyed the TV cameras, and set up their alternative living and organising spaces since the 1970s.

This book is about remembering, and about restoring some of the radicals, some of the unruly, to the history of Sydney. It discovers the street corners where they spoke, their union offices and lecture halls, and the pubs and cafés in which they socialised. It follows their marches into the city and the battles they fought with police. It goes into the studios where the posters, banners and films were produced, and the theatres where political skits lambasted the powerful. It remembers the writers, printers and editors of radical Sydney, and the pamphlets and journals that carried their ideas of justice, equality and the common good. It tells of lives lived in politics, and honours a politics that places the betterment of society and the pursuit of social justice before self-interest.
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