Review by Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill of James Bennett, Nancy Cushing, Erik Eklund (editors), Radical Newcastle (Sydney: NewSouth Books, 2015). A version of this document was published in Labour History, Number 110, May 2016, pp. 204-205.

The editors of Radical Newcastle, James Bennett, Nancy Cushing, and Erik Eklund, all University of Newcastle historians, describe their book as ‘the outcome of community-engaged research’ that aimed to connect ‘with the interests and concerns of our local community’. In other words its genre is public history with community involvement. The collection begins ahistorically with a definition of radicalism based on the Oxford English Dictionary and a British handbook on radicalism, rather than proceeding with an understanding of radicalism/society as process, as a series of situations in which people act, institutions react, and structures change. Meaning, not definition; that’s what has to be grasped, and the issue for the reader is that as the subject of this book is radicalism, to what extent are its contents ‘radical’?

There are thirty chapters in this book; less than half of them qualify as radical history. The others would have been at home in a book on Liberal Newcastle, their tone bland and even-handed, the product of an academic culture that values description over commitment. Readers, it seems, must not be allowed to assume that the authors are identifying with embarrassing ideas like class and domination or contentious action that ignores the ‘right’ channels for protest.

In the chapters that are examples of radical history, we can detect a radical point of view. It is not just that their chapters are about people in movement, challenging, resisting, and so on. Rather the authors are keen to tell us about it in a way that stirs the heart and the head to consider our own situation. Sometimes our attention is caught by the drama of the struggle, as in Rod Noble’s account of the mass civil disobedience of mining communities in the late nineteenth century, and in Ross Edmonds’ chapter on the Silksworth dispute in which militant unionists showed that ‘the radical spirit of anti-imperialism and internationalism’ could overcome ‘unthinking racism’. In Ann Curthoys’ chapter on Barbara Curthoys’ involvement in the Aboriginal rent strike at Purfleet Reserve, however, it is the attention to organisation that compels. We learn not just about the tasks and the planning, the meetings and publicity, but also about the history of Aboriginal politics and Communist Party strategy. We also learn, of course, about a remarkable woman, an intellectual as well as an activist, who, as Ann writes, had a deep effect on her own involvement in Aboriginal issues. There is another mother-daughter connection in Jude Conway’s chapter on the Right to Choose Abortion Coalition that Josephine Conway helped to form. When Josephine turned 80 a friend said that she was a living reminder that radicalism was a way of life, a description that comes across also in the first-hand accounts of their environmental campaigning by Bernadette Smith, and Paula Morrow. The personal dimension of these chapters helps us understand radicalism as a living force rather than a dead definition.

It has always been a radical approach to history writing to insist on rescuing the common people and subversive ideas that mainstream history neglects. There are several chapters that meet that criterion. Tony Laffan’s chapter on the Hall of Science discovers a local free thought movement nurturing and nurtured by industrial militancy, while the chapter by Peta Belic and Erik Eklund on the One Big Union shows the persistence of syndicalist ideas. Among the courageous anti-conscriptionists of
1916, there was a range of forces and views, and Tod Moore and Harry Williams argue that the most radical were not reported in the press and have consequently disappeared from history. In his chapter, John Maynard successfully restores the significant activism of two white activists, John Maloney and his daughter Dorothy. They campaigned for Aboriginal rights, making contact with the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association, the first all-Aboriginal political organisation in Australia. In the best radical history, the actors are never ciphers but real flesh-and-blood people. Two chapters stand out in this regard: Troy Duncan’s on activist Anglican priest Father Alf Clint, and Shane Hopkinson’s and Tom Griffiths’ on Neville Cunningham, Communist, activist and working class intellectual.

Finally, we want to cheer for two chapters of forensic social analysis. Bernadette Smith situates the 1979 Star Hotel riot in the context of Newcastle’s history of class struggle, before placing the state in the frame and looking at local policing and power politics. She also explains the culture of the pub in a sociological way, challenging/undermining a whole lot of safe/traditional academic wisdom. Griff Foley has brought together five cases of ‘community conservation’ – a neglected aspect of environmental history – in order to address the most important question in social movement as well as revolutionary politics: how do activists learn? The answer: informally and incidentally, and making this explicit helps their practice.

Overall, Radical Newcastle is a mixed bag of hits, almosts, and misses. Considered in the context of Australian radical historical writing, it provides opportunity to reflect upon the nature of radical history, how it is written, and how the historian can render struggles of the past in ways that instruct and inspire the present.

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