Radicals—Remembering the Sixties

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Meredith Burgmann & Nadia Wheatley, Radicals—Remembering the Sixties. Newsouth Publishing, 2021, 395 pp.

Last week I was given a book by anarchist and social ecologist Brian Laver, whom I have known for 46 years, initially as a fellow member of the Brisbane Self-Management Group (SMG) in the mid- 1970's, then its heir the Libertarian Socialist Organisation (LSO) into the early 80's. Thereafter as someone with philosophical affinity, notably a shared respect and affection for, but not deference to, the writings of American radical Murray Bookchin.

The book is called "*Radicals: Remembering the Sixties*" and is a biography of the early lives of 20 then young people whose activism reflected the idealism of that turbulent era. Brian Laver is one of those selected. It also includes both the authors who tell their own story as well as sharing the recollections of the other eighteen contributors. The participants mirror different political convictions ranging from anarchist through to social democratic variations. There is a surprising lack of discussion of New Left or Old Left ideology despite their significance being acknowledged in the anthology's introduction. This is in some measure due to the authors' intention to explore the origins of their subjects' personality as much as beliefs, so family and schooling, social background and religion are explored in about 15 pages for each person, with large font appropriate to the present age of Sixties' readers! The intention to introduce the "radical" as a person including but beyond the political realm is apparent.

Paradoxically, the repudiation-or reshaping- of the values inherent in these personal influences is seen as critical to the formation of the radicalism the authors see characterised by "openness and freedom…the grassroots organisation (of) New Left ideology… in opposition to the hierarchical structures and dogmatism of the Old Left." They stress "And it means fun, not fundamentalism." (Introduction, xiii). Radicalism ushered in a new identity.

The book is a succession of interviews conducted by activists from the 60's and 70's, Meredith Burgmann and Nadia Wheatley. Wheatley's writing is more poetical and "psychological", Burgmann's more prosaic, a touch staccato at times, a greater hint of levity. This may be a reflection of life experiences as much as personality. Nadia's childhood tragedy and abuse were worlds away from Meredith Burgmann 's loving and supportive childhood. Reading was a life-saving escape for Wheatley, her youthful aspirations to become an author realised in adulthood.

Wheatley's books have included biography, children's fiction and the 2018 memoir, "*Her Mother's Daughter*" a dedication to the beloved mother who died when she was a child.

Nadia tutoring Meredith at University in English poetry "taking pity on my obvious lack of 'Eng. Lit' aptitude… (which) certainly helped me through the torture of English honours" (9) may offer another hint as to differing styles while Burgmann's literary aspirations were quickly channelled in more practical vein. Burgmann followed the later path of many a left- wing student of the era, lecturing at Sydney's Macquarie University for seventeen years, then becoming first a member, later president, of the New South Wales Legislative Upper House.

Do women writers sometimes make narratives more personal, perceive people's vulnerabilities more sensitively? Certainly, a personal background fills a void often existing in political conversation in offering a more complete portrait of a person and their life. It also defies a long-held convention that detachment is critical in observing political or philosophical accuracy or "Truth", adds a more discerning dimension to the supposed objectivity of the establishment, this itself one of the main targets of 1960's revolt (Chomsky, *Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship*, 1968). Contemporary ideological discernment may witness the inclusion of many former youthful radicals within a more liberal version of this establishment.

In the words of the authors, the people whose early lives appear in these biographies have been selected to mirror the range of the "diverse phenomenon" that was the Sixties in Australia. It is a commentary on Australian culture and political history that the Sixties here are defined as between 1965 and 1975! We were always a bit behind the rest of the world! It also reflects the perceptions of the authors. Perhaps internationally renowned human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson is right in saying older expatriates Clive James (writer), Barry Humphries (comedian and satirist), Germaine Greer (writer and feminist) and Robert Hughes (art critic) left Australia because in their eyes it was boring, not because it was bad. The youth here saw differently.

"In the eclectic mix (of people interviewed) there is a Maoist, an Anarchist and a Trotskyist" (Intro., xvii). The authors continue: "… some people (like us) were lower-case socialists, communists or anarchists (or a mixture of all three)" (Intro, xvii). A reflection of the broader student body in that era. I recall the impact of Christian Marxism, briefly exploring the post-Stalinist Communist Party, flirting with the Trotskyist Communist League, then settling on the anarchist Self-Management Group in the early and middle seventies.

Few of those in this book claimed long -term allegiance to any particular "ideology" beyond the mainstream. It was a ferment of exploration, but a small minority maintained radicalism into mature adult life as indicated here. Brian Laver is the sole anarchist while Melbourne activist Albert Langer still claims to be an anarchist Maoist (88)! Langer was described by prominent liberal political journalist Mungo MacCallum in the 1960's as "the youngest and most brilliant of the student revolutionary leaders" (83). However, even if said "with a self-deprecating laugh", to still affirm today "an affection for anarchism… 'I will accept being called an anarcho-Stalinist'" displays enormous philosophical contradiction (88). He was expelled from Monash University and blacklisted from many jobs, ultimately becoming a telecom technician.

Helen Voysey became a Trotskyist at 15, influenced in part by her parents' membership in the Communist Party, as well as being the youngest speaker at the 1970 Moratorium. Her brief career biography in the anthology's appendix makes reference to membership of a London Trotskyist group in the 1970's, none thereafter, but we do learn that she devoted enormous effort as a doctor to helping Aboriginal patients in the Northern Territory.

The writers touch on reasons for this lack of ideological commitment in its most extreme form in that there was "almost no culture of political violence" after the bloodshed of European colonisation in Australia and the nation had a class-based party in existence, unlike the US. "No Weather Underground, no Angry Brigade, no Baader-Meinhof Gang for us down under." (349) Certainly the Sixties in Australia saw no widespread or violent upheaval to compare with Paris 68 or the tragedy of Kent State in 1970. However, the paucity of deeper critique seems to suggest that fervour favours conspiratorial violence. The Brisbane booklet "*You can't Blow up a Social Relationship, the Anarchist case against Terrorism*" is as pertinent today as when penned in the 1970's in repudiating the myth that violence, particularly terrorism, equates with radical transformation (*Libertarian Socialist Organisation,* 1978). The notion that the Labor party is "class-based" has more to do with Burgmann's fifty -year membership than reality!

The quickly quelled Eureka Stockade revolt by gold prospectors in 1854 in Ballarat is perhaps the most notable example of Australian historical challenges to authority. Looking out our family window as I write, I see the blue and white banner of the Eureka rebellion waving in the breeze together with that of the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) on the building site opposite. Radicalism within a narrow spectrum.

The themes permeating the revolt of youth in Australia were both global and particular. International in opposing war in Vietnam, South African apartheid and Western imperialism, particular in opposing the treatment of Australian indigenous people and conscription by lottery, the stultifying reality of the post-war Liberal Country coalition government (1949–1972) led for 16 years by arch- conservative Robert Menzies. The pernicious White Australia Policy was anathema to all, but of those interviewed here, lawyer Geoffrey Robertson articulated this injustice the most fervently as radical spur.

"Both of us were from middle-class and conservative backgrounds. Both of us had been educated at single-sex private schools. Both of us were raised in the dreary puritanism of Sydney Anglicanism" Burgmann and Wheatley recall (Introduction, xiii). This observation could apply just as accurately to almost all of the other people interviewed in the anthology, with the exception of the three black interviewees. Another difference would be the religious divide. A number of the activists came from Catholic homes. The authors observe that those from a Protestant background rarely commented on this aspect of their upbringing, whereas it was one of the first topics described by those who were raised Catholics. The writers ponder the "all-encompassing" nature of such an early life-experience.

The families of most of the 20 interviewees identified as middle-class or aspired to this realm. Journalist and lawyer David Marr came from a wealthy iron — owning and manufacturing background. Half attended private schools, two others the "fiercely selective" Melbourne High School, artist Vivienne Binns the equally selective and academic North Sydney Girls' High. Fifteen went to university, ten-possibly eleven — the "revered" sandstone institutions of Sydney, Melbourne, Queensland, Adelaide and Canberra's ANU. The institutional identity of Helen Voysey's medical degree is not revealed-sandstone Sydney or non- sandstone New South Wales, University. Twelve are men and eight are women. As observed, three represent the cause of Aboriginal rights.

The stories of black activists Gary Foley, Bronwyn Penrith and Gary Williams describe very different lives from those of the radicals from white Australia, despite their own relatively fortunate childhoods. Foley was a public spokesperson for the black movement in the 1970's, playing crucial roles in creating the Redfern Legal Service and Medical Service in inner Sydney as well as the Aboriginal Embassy opposite Parliament House in Canberra. His childhood was a better

one than most indigenous people, his father having regular employment as well as being a star footballer and Gary excelled at school. However, when the family moved to Queensland Gary refused to come. Even at 12 he knew of the endemic paternalistic racism in the "Sunshine State."

Sadly, moving to Nambucca Heads on the New South Wales North Coast, he met equally entrenched racism. Despite his outstanding grades and athletic prowess, he was expelled by the headmaster at the public school a year before matriculation with the words "Don't come back next year, Foley…*We- don't — want — your- kind- here*" (38). Thirty years of hatred towards education were partially healed with first class honours in History at the University of Melbourne followed by the Chancellor's award for his Doctorate of Philosophy. He is now Professor of History at Victoria University.

Bronwyn had the good fortune to be reunited with her father and his second wife when her mother gave birth at seventeen. She became the "*Miracle Child*" (her biography's title), avoiding her mother's fate of being placed in aboriginal care as a small child following her own mother's death, a member of the Stolen Generation. A loving family offered a stability that was lost in Sydney with a violent partner. She found and gave support to other Aboriginal women in similarly violent relationships through the Redfern Women' s Service as well as acting in indigenous street theatre.

Gary Williams also experienced a loving childhood, ironically in the same town where Gary Foley was later ostracised. Williams found no racism at the local Catholic school unlike Foley at the public one, indeed Catholicism is still a part of his life as an older man. He matriculated from high school with distinction but his studies at Sydney University became secondary to the whirl of political activism in the city. Gary took part in the 1965 Freedom Ride to western New South Wales against rural and regional racism and the anti-Springbok demonstrations in 1971, as well as helping create the Aboriginal Legal Service. He worked in the office of later High Court judge, Ken Jacobs, as a judge's assistant but abandoned the study of Law. Depicted on the iconic Black Power poster with Foley and well-known Queensland activist Dennis Walker, son of acclaimed indigenous poet, Kath Walker, her tribal name Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Gary returned to Nambucca Heads in the early 1990's to teach and preserve indigenous languages.

One could be cynical and observe all three Black biographies show people with loving and stable childhoods, like the majority of the whites from this era, that both Aboriginal men attended university like almost all the white interviewees. However, racism embittered Gary Foley for decades and Williams abandoned study to immerse himself in the black communal movements of the 1960's and 1970's. They experienced police discrimination and violence in Sydney. Community is the essence of the black movement and this is where grassroots radicalism is to be found.

The titles bestowed upon the book's contributors (or their own offering?) are quirky but revelatory. "The Girl who threw the tomato" describes Wheatley's unsought notoriety for a possibly hers, misdirected missile striking the NSW Governor. Geoffrey Roberson heralds his stand on "The right side of history". Journalist and broadcaster David Marr, he from the wealthy iron-making family and company on the privileged Upper North Shore with its then 200 workers "across the harbour in the industrial suburb of Waterloo", educated at Sydney Church of England Grammar School, Arts/Law at Sydney University, affirms "Taking on the Rich and Powerful". Counter culturalist lighting innovator Roger Foley states "I hate being bored". Actor John Derum recalls "We were mad 'Milligan anarchic'". Robbie Swan revels in "Fun Along the way", Peter Duncan is more sober, asserting "Activism works-and it works in parliament".

While Burgmann became well-known in her youth for her courageous opposition to the visiting all-white Springbok rugby team in 1971, her running onto the field in the face of police violence an enduring symbol, Wheatley as a writer of children's books stressing indigenous characters in her children's books, Geoffrey Robertson was internationally known as a barrister defending the Oz magazine editors against charges of obscenity in 1971 and author Salman Rushdie, well before he defended Julian Assange. His father was a Commonwealth Bank executive and he attended Sydney University before moving to England and fame.

However, a focus here should be on Laver as the sole anarchist. Born in 1944, he too came from a fortunate background, his immediate and extended family near the Central Queensland city of Rockhampton being generational cattlemen. His own family moved to Rockhampton when he was a child. Tennis was in the Laver blood and before Brian became known for his revolutionary politics his cousin, Rod, was already taking the tennis world by storm.

The deep north of Queensland was the most unlikely place to be radicalised but Laver was an independent youth. He told me that the original title of his biography was "*Fighting Totalitarianism*" but mistakenly appeared in print as "*Fighting Fascism*". Brian's disappointment is understandable given that the proximity of Rockhampton to the American war time camps during World War 2 had etched the horror of Japanese fascism onto his early mind but awareness of the broader obscenity of totalitarianism was his adolescent political awakening. A documentary shown by a History teacher at Rockhampton Grammar School showing Stalinist persecution was the moment of enlightenment.

At 15 he gained a scholarship to the prestigious Church of England Grammar School in Brisbane, acknowledgement of academic promise as well as the tennis ability nurtured within the Laver clan. Here he showed signs of future rebellion when refusing to join the school cadets. At this stage not an act of revolution but scorn for the pretend soldiers. He indeed intended to join the professional elite at Duntroon Military Academy in Canberra after leaving school. Instead his focus became the stirring of civil dissent at Queensland University (UQ) while studying History-and playing tennis.

During the mid-sixties his lunchtime oratory initially earned him mockery on a conservative campus, a mockery that gradually garnered respect and support from students seeing the body bags of young men on television at night and realising the approaching reality of the Vietnam War conscription lottery. He displayed remarkable courage in the face of threats and physical intimidation from police and was one of many arrested protesting the reactionary Bjelke-Petersen's government street march bans in 1966 and especially 1967.

His opposition to Vietnam and the influence of former Berkeley academic now UQ History lecturer, Ralph Summy, saw the creation of the Students for Democracy, liberal democracy the social quest, participatory democracy the method. The daily forum speeches against the war and the dictatorial Queensland government were physically dangerous with violent assaults from right wing students. There were death threats and intimidation from police.

He was suspended from the University, strenuously opposed before obtaining brief teaching positions at two Brisbane universities and blacklisted from many jobs, initially refused entry to England and for many years the United States. Plying his trade as a professional tennis coach in the US (after "breaching" farcical Florida entrance surveillance) and Australia sustained his family from the 1980's to the present. Brian expresses his regret at the impact of his activism on his first wife and young family.

Laver's visit to Czechoslovakia in 1968 made tangible his years of youthful condemnation of totalitarian communism as much as imperialistic West. While also trying to protect his young family he confronted the Russian invasion joining forces with the Metalworkers Union. When the Czech forces were overcome, he travelled to England, smuggling visual documentary footage of the invasion, the first film of the tragedy, to English radical Tariq Ali. On his return to Australia he was an anarchist.

During the 1960's Brian and Monash University's Albert Langer were the most public faces of the Australian student movement. I recall listening to the former's orations in the Great Court in 1969, thousands challenged and inspired. His prevention from speaking at the 1970 Moratorium, restrained by union and Labor party heavies, was proclaimed on the libertarian Self-Management Group policy broadsheet. Symbolic. I joined the group, created in 1971, in early 1975, leaving its heir the Libertarian Socialist Organisation during 1980. Brian projected a charisma, both personal and a legacy of his crucial and courageous role in raising student radical awareness, that engaged.

As the politics of dissent became isolated following the election of the reformist Labor Party in 1972, radical groups became more conspicuous yet more marginalised, increasingly fraught with internal conflict. Sectarian politics by the mid-1970's revolved increasingly around Brian's perceived domination in the Self-Management Group, a perception he would challenge asserting the necessary role of leaders. Others saw this as contradictory in an egalitarian group. In 1977, individual anarchists and newly converted Marxists broke with the social anarchist core. By the 1980's fracture came again as former stalwarts embraced the emerging popularity of Green politics.

True to his past, Brian remains an anarchist, a libertarian socialist sometimes preferring the description of social ecologist, a notable- at times still provocative- figure in Brisbane's West End cosmopolitan community. He co-sponsored the visit of Chomsky to Australia. His respect for Bookchin's "*Ecology of Freedom*" did not prevent a four- hour telephone discussion culminating in verbal conflict with the father of the concepts of social ecology, libertarian municipalism and dialectical naturalism over the integrity of participating in municipal administrations mirroring the state.

Brief pen pictures of the participants' post-Sixties' and early Seventies careers conclude this anthology. Seven taught in academia for varying periods, three becoming Professors. Four became politicians, one a medical doctor, two, lawyers, two others high-profile journalists, (i mainstream print and ABC) one of these, director of ABC current affairs. One academic became a politician, one politician an academic, Robertson a visiting Professor as well as barrister. Another interviewee became a policy adviser for the New South Wales Ministry for Education. All became prominent in their field.

These appended biographies confirm historical "lessons" that most of the middle-class return to type, even those truly radical in their youth. Undoubtedly the children of the Sixties had ideals and courage but for almost all, with a society now more enlightened, social transformation was seen as the fruit of social reform and social conscience, the province of the liberal, not broader revolutionary endeavour.

It does in some sense affirm Bookchin's response thirty — five years ago to Rudi Dutschke's maxim that young radicals needed to commence "the long march through the institutions". Bookchin observed: "American radicalism (marched) from the stormy student campuses of the sixties to the more serene faculty rooms of the eighties. Its buoyant populism has been abandoned for a restful Marxism." (*Post — Scarcity Anarchism*, Second Introduction, 1986). In

Australia, social democracy with a dash of Marxism would be the new norm. The dismissal of the Labor Whitlam government in 1975 by the English Queen's representative channelled anger into popular support if not, until 1983, electoral success.

It is ironic if not surprising that the young radicals became more socially aware examples of their conservative parents. While not denying the principles held, University- educated youth could defy Vietnam and conscription with the safety of deferment or find peer support if becoming draft resisters and conscientious objectors. They knew good careers awaited. Their parents had suffered war and Depression, yearned for stability.

It is too easy to be cynical of all the youthful rebels in their adult years, radical or revolutionary politics demands a high price as I and others know from personal experience, yet these biographies dispel any sense of a working-class movement challenging capitalism and the state. Activists like former Self-Management Group member and doctor, Joe Toscano, (not interviewed in this anthology) rallying libertarian communalism through broadcasting and writing in Victoria since political exile from Queensland in the mid-70's, are rare.

Is my experience of a much- loved and admired older and only sibling, brilliant scholar and academic, Catholic feminist, in Canberra since the early 1970's, with an ambitious public servant husband, relevant to this discussion? She influenced me greatly as a teenager in the late 60's introducing me to Christian pacifism, Catholic anarchists Dorothy Day and the Berrigan brothers, the New Left, but was detached from the naive confidence then desperation of my youth supporting elderly, isolated parents, a mother critically, chronically, then terminally ill over 14 years, the years of caring for an octogenarian father after her death. (He had been a survivor of the Depression as well as corporate ruthlessness when made redundant in his fifties with two small children).

Accompanying and subsequent long-term unemployment over eleven desperate years then intermittent itinerant contracts spanning nine years and at times thousands of kilometres was my personal struggle for many years to come. My sister's 13 years of continuous study in Classics at three universities witnessed and heralded an extraordinary command of philosophy and theology, but together with 50 years' residence in the "bubble" of Australia's capital was yet another dimension of removal from the harsh reality of most peoples' existence.

This highlights the fleeting nature of the Sixties for many youthful radicals who embraced "issues" and appealing social visions but then saw change within the system as more practical — and often more comfortable. It also revealed the vulnerability of young radicals to personal or family challenges as well as community isolation and social ostracism where radical conviction and confidence could be confused with instant maturity and personal awareness. My drink — driving on occasions during 1980 and, despite my sister's immediate reassurance and crucial parental support, years of guilty uncertainty, graphically illustrated a man unaware of personal issues unresolved, Catholic repressions persisting, existentialism gone awry. The police from whom I sought information revealed an unexpected kindness.

My religiously-inspired introspection had become atheistic social conviction yet Catholic constraints persisted unseen and more healthy reflection lay fallow. Politically erudite but personally myopic, I was oblivious to the loss of community even personhood inherent in a total rejection of an "all-encompassing" Catholic past and the simultaneous impact of family trauma.

Burgmann and Wheatley's observation that "(their) participants could not move further along their chosen radical pathway until they had resolved their questions of faith…this was most important for the Catholics" (342) is both insightful and glib, thoughtful but naïve in broader

reference. Such profound transformation is not so quickly understood or realised. Radicals more than those of any other ideology need deep and honest personal perception as well as communal nurture to live on the political margins.

Comprised mainly of former or current young radical students, the Brisbane 1970's anarchists formed strong political bonds but not the steadfast connections of workers in Spanish affinity groups. Urban cosmopolitanism was not the bedrock of anarchism as "a way of life …lived in the closely knit villages of the (Spanish) countryside and the intense neighbourhood life of the working- class barrios" (*To Remember Spain*, Bookchin, 10).

Most of the still politically active group members mirrored the mature pathways depicted in this anthology, in the 1980's consolidating careers in the university and/or publishing worlds while moving into the emerging Green reformist political arena. Humane, privileged, detached particularly from the experiences of those on the social and economic margins.

The purpose of this anthology is to present individual narratives but I think "nuances" such as this personal description are lost when the youth and prominence of the protagonists is the focus and public or community "achievement" and "success", however worthy, are the criteria of post-university adult life summaries. This may contribute to the authors' lofty conclusion that "We were determined to change the world- and we did" (352). We see nothing of the later personal shadows that surely must attend the lives of even the prominent, certainly the less conspicuous or those on the margins.

This book is instructive in recalling a turbulent time and embracing distinctive and influential personalities from an historically significant era. It evokes distant memories and passions that contributed to profound if not revolutionary social change. It does exhibit a disconcerting lack of continuity with its primary focus on a snapshot of the interviewee's lives as understandable as that focus may be. It also exemplifies Bookchin's observation that the Old Left was always more philosophically and politically educated than the New Left. He would have added, more committed. Inclusion of less well-known or 'successful' people from the period, some of the casualties, would have broadened the book's perspective and deepened its appeal.

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