

Learning After Work One Hundred Years Ago: Workingmen's Institutes In Inner City Sydney.

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In the inner city neighbourhoods of Sydney, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of workingmen's institutes were established. This paper looks at five of these institutes: Balmain; Glebe; Leichhardt; Newtown; and Rozelle. From the records that have survived, it appears that these institutes operated successfully for a number of years, had large and active memberships, and played a significant role in the lives of their local communities. However little has been written about these institutes and there are a number of questions that remain largely unanswered. What motivated their foundation? Who were their members? What was their relationship to the broader working class and labour movement? It is these questions that this paper sets out to begin to address.

Introduction

All of us are familiar with the term school of arts, most of us know the alternate term mechanics' institute, and some of us are even familiar with yet another widely used term, literary institute. However, across Australia, many other names were also used to describe these institutions - including: miners' institute, railway institute, postal institute, athenaeum, lyceum, temperance hall, free library, memorial hall, public hall, soldiers' hall, peoples' hall, and workingmen's institute. It is with the last of these, that this paper is primarily concerned. In some of the more overtly working class inner city neighbourhoods of Sydney at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the more usual terms were not used. Instead in these localities, their institutes or schools were generally, at least in the beginning, styled as workingmen's institutes. It is the story of five of these Workingmen's Institutes that the first part of this paper sets out to tell.

But on a deeper level what was the real significance of the use of this name rather than the more usual school of arts or mechanics' institute. Today, workers' education (by which most observers generally mean trade union education) is regarded as a sub field of adult education. It is usually described as that part of adult education, which caters for adults in their capacity of workers and especially in their role as members of workers' organizations (Hopkins, 1985, 2). However, in the period under consideration in this paper, these distinctions were nowhere as clear-cut and the terms adult education and workers' education were often used interchangeably. This is not surprising given that, for many of its protagonists, the fundamental purpose of adult education was to reach those working class adults who had been ruthlessly sifted out by the formal education system (Stubblefield, 1988, 173-179). But just how radical and class based that education was to be is another question, which the second part of this paper attempts to address, albeit, in an initial and a partial manner.

The Institutes

In the suburbs of Balmain, Glebe, Leichhardt, Newtown, and Rozelle, there were founded, in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, five workingmen's institutes. These institutes, as the following brief account shows, were for a number of years very successful, had large active memberships, played a significant role in the life of their locality, and provided much for their members and their communities. But as time passed and the nature of their communities and the wider Australian society changed, they become less relevant and they declined.

The Balmain Workingmen's Institute - for the moral, social, and intellectual improvement of its members - was founded in 1865. For a number of years it operated from the Odd fellows' Hall. Because of its early success it soon became apparent that a more permanent and much larger home was required. However, it took more than 20 years for the Institute to obtain a site and to accumulate the necessary funds to be in a position to construct a purpose built building. This new building, originally erected in 1887, was added to on three occasions, and, by the end of the century, consisted of: a 400seat lecture theatre/auditorium; a reading room and large lending library; a six table billiard room; and numerous smoking, card, meeting and class rooms. At that time the institute had 600 members and had cost more than 6000 pounds to build. Norman Selfe, Chief Engineer at Mort's Dock, President of the Association of Engineers, "the father of technical education in NSW" and a long time Vice President of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts served as one of the three trustees of the Balmain Workingman's Institute in its heyday. (Souvenir, 1910, 47).

The Glebe Workingmen's Institute was founded, with similar aims to that of its Balmain neighbour. For a great many years it operated using the premises of the Glebe Congregationalist Church. Finally, in the early 1900s, it moved into its own premises at 191-5 Pyrmont Road where it operated until the early 1950s. Here it offered its members: a lending library; a reading room; a lecture hall; a couple of class/meeting rooms; and, of course, a six table billiard room (Solling & Reynolds, 1997, 40). Later, the Institute adopted the more usual terminology and renamed itself as a school of arts.

The Newtown Workingmen's Institute was formed in 1899, by a group of prominent local residents who were desirous of seeing better relations between "men and their masters". The newly elected committee rented rooms in St George's Hall and supporters donated all sorts of educational and recreational equipment, including a billiard table. The institute was an immediate success and soon moved to rented premises in Eliza Street. Later these premises were purchased and extensively rebuilt. The newly renovated building boasted the following purpose built facilities: a large library with its own street entrance; a substantial lecture hall; a six-table billiard room; and various smaller reading, retiring, smoking, games, meeting and classrooms. Later, the Newtown Workingmen's Institute

changed its name to the Newtown School of Arts (Norman, 1963, 71).

The Leichhardt Workingmen's Institute was formed in 1904. The Local member of the NSW Parliament had obtained the land and a 500pound government grant to assist with the building costs. The membership grew steadily and the members were soon very proud of their institute, which they described as boasting "... a good library, a fine reading room and card room, together with a billiard room containing six first class tables" (Jubilee, 1921, 74). Later, the Leichhardt Workingmen's Institute also renamed itself as a School of Arts.

In 1907, the Balmain Municipality gained a second workingmen's institute, when the Rozelle Workingmen's Institute was built in Weston Road, which later was renamed as Victoria Road. The building cost about 1500 pounds and contained a substantial lecture hall, a library, a reading room, a games room, meeting and classrooms, and a large billiard room (Souvenir, 1910, 75). The Rozelle Workingmen's Institute also later changed its name but in this case to the Rozelle Mechanics' Institute.

Take but one snapshot of the histories of these Institutes and a series of very interesting facts are revealed. In 1912 -

- Balmain Workingmen's Institute had 696 members and a library of 6540 books.
- Glebe Workingman's Institute had 320 members and a library of 2543 books.
- Leichhardt Workingman's Institute had 215 members and a library of 2300 books.
- Newtown Workingmen's Institute had 250 members and a library of 2200 books.
- Rozelle Workingmen's Institute had 309 members and a library of 2451 books.

That year, Rozelle's income from its billiard tables was 1908 pounds: more than enough to run a first class community resource in those days.

At that time the Glebe, the Leichhardt and the Newtown Municipalities did not operate public libraries. In the library collections of the two local municipalities that did, Annandale and Balmain, there were only 628 and 800 books respectively. (Solling & Reynolds, 1997, 63-4),

From about 1950, following the consolidation of the small local municipalities, the establishment and expansion of local municipal public libraries, and the growth of a whole range of other more special providers of community services and facilities, the workingmen's institutes, like their more conventionally named cousins, began to decline rapidly. Some went out of existence; their premises converted to another public use or fell into private ownership, others, survived, and continue to serve their communities until this day.

Notwithstanding their eventual decline, for a great many years these suburban workingmen's institutes were very important intellectual, social, civic, as well as recreational centres for their communities. Their libraries were always prominent. Diverse local groups (lodges, Churches, political parties, trade unions, and sporting bodies) hired their halls and meeting rooms for a range of purposes. Regular dances and a variety of private functions were held. The main hall was frequently used for lectures, public meetings and civic occasions or to immunise the community's children. And, of course billiards, cards, and other games provided opportunities for relaxation and fellowship in an alcohol free context.

A Deeper Look

While it would be patently untrue to claim that these Institutes arose as a direct product of militant and unalloyed proletarian consciousness, it would be equally untrue to claim that they were merely the creation of middle class paternalism (Dodge, 1988, 51). The situation, both in political and educational terms, was much more complex, as were the backgrounds, personalities, and motivations of the people actually involved, and, of course, the specific historical circumstances that surrounded the formation and continued operation of each of these Institutes varied greatly.

As the nineteenth century ended, Australian nationalism bloomed. An important part of that nationalism was the growing confidence and power of the labour movement both in terms of the trade union and the parliamentary wings of that movement. Moreover, the whole political culture and rhetoric of the soon to be created new nation was very liberal and humane with a strong commitment to the future and a firm belief in modernism. The new century was to be the century of the common man. Australia was to be a paradise for the workingman and his family. Indeed, many of new suburbs that were then spreading along the newly constructed suburban railways and tramlines were marketed as being the "workingman's paradise".

The turn of the nineteenth /twentieth century was a period of some optimism among educationalists concerning the potentialities of the ordinary man and woman in terms of their intellectual capabilities and educability (Simon, 1982, 88). This was the period of the first great round of educational reforms in NSW that heralded the beginning of the era of mass education. Primary education was restructured. Public secondary education was begun with the establishment of academic high schools for the gifted and of the so-called continuation schools and classes for the great mass of pupils. State wide public examinations were established: the Qualifying Certificate; the Intermediate Certificate; and the Leaving Certificate. Teacher education was regularised and the teachers' college established, Technical education was formalised and became part of the publicly controlled and funded system. The university was, at last, partially opened to talented working class scholars on the basis of merit.

In many respects, this period marks the establishment of modern adult education, as we know it today. But then of course the mission of adult education was a much more class driven one. There were (and are) - among socialists, social democrats and left liberals - at least four overlapping points of view on the role of adult/workers' education in social change. It is possible to place these points of view on a continuum, moving from the "left" to "right" from the more "revolutionary" to the more "liberal". First, there is the "revolutionary" view, which emphasises the role of such education almost exclusively within the world of "insurrectionist" or "manifesto" politics. Second, there is the so called "re-constructionist" view, which aims at the formation of a politically active working class with the capacity to change their society through a real involvement in their unions, their workplaces and communities and the broader political process in all its manifestations. Third, there is the "reformist" view, which seeks to modify and reform capitalism (rather than to transform it) by assisting workers to gain a measure of political space, social justice, and the some time to adjust to societal changes. Fourth, there is the "liberal" view, which believes that educational experiences should produce adults who were well educated, rational, thoughtful, tolerant, open minded, and immune to propoganda: social change here is merely what happened when adults become better educated and more reasonable. (Law, 1993, 9 and Stubblefield, 1988, 177) While examples of all these points of view probably could be found among the founders and members of the working men's institutes, it is clear that, like most of the then Australian labour movement, the prevailing point of view would have been more towards the social democratic and liberal end of the continuum.

But this does not necessarily mean that the "accepted academic wisdom" ("accepted" by many on both the left and the right) is correct. This "accepted" point of view sees the covert role of the Institutes as being to maintain the social status quo and to serve the economic needs of the employing class by diverting working class unrest onto the respectable path to moral rectitude, self-improvement, and useful knowledge (Whitelock, 1974, 10). If it was the intention of the middle class to use the Institutes to save/reform/redirect the working class: then the Institutes were indeed glorious failures. From the reports of their more working class members, the Institutes did meet, at least to some extent, their needs for recreation, companionship, and intellectual stimulation: thus, it can be argued, the Institutes were modest successes (Morris, 2003, 162). Moreover, they were a very significant local community resource: the institutes provided a place to meet, to read and to learn. Laurent (1989, 37) reports that Labour Electoral Leagues and Women's Suffrage groups used the facilities of the Institutes, as did the unions, the benefit societies and the fraternal lodges. Further, their libraries, as well as stocking popular fiction, offered the standard works of contemporary Socialist thought while their Debating Clubs explored leftwing topics (for example Land Nationalisation, Socialism, and the Advantages of Cooperation). Finally, their lecture programs: featured speakers like the great socialist orator, Tom Mann; helped to popularise

the ideas of Darwin and Huxley; and promoted a belief in the inevitability of progress and the eventual triumph of modernism.

However, it does appear that the members of the Institutes were from a particular component of the working class: they largely seemed to have belonged to what may be termed the protestant working class. The role of the protestant working class in the story of Australia has been little studied and what little study that has been done, has focussed on the most negative aspect of that role: that is, on its anti Catholic sectarianism. Here the part played by Sir Henry Parkes, perennial politician and serial Prime Minister of NSW, who often used anti-Catholic sentiment to mobilise Protestant opinion in his favour, is crucial. Parkes, the architect of public education ("free, compulsory, and secular") in New South Wales and the "father" of Australian Federation, was himself largely educated within the Institutes' movement. This tradition was continued and intensified, by a series of conservative political leaders, as the strength of the infant Labour Party grew. In many of the newer suburbs, it was widely believed, that to be successful, a local politician had to be a protestant, a churchgoer, a mason, and an advocate of temperance.

The immigrant protestant workers had carried with them to Australia a mixed bag of cultural practices, political ideas, and religious beliefs. They came from Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Cornwall, and Germany as well as England. They were Primitive Methodists, Congregationalists, Salvationists, Presbyterians, and Baptists, as well as evangelical Anglicans and Lutherans. They brought with them, especially the miners, a range of militant political ideas, social and religious beliefs, and trade union practices. They had a strong tradition of self-education and mutual self-improvement through involvement in cooperative and fraternal organizations. They belonged to a range of associations: trade unions, fraternal lodges, friendly and benefit societies. Many protestant working people, as well as being resolute trade union members and loyal labour voters, were also orderly, respectable, home owning and chapel going. Some were, in addition, anti gambling and strong supporters of the temperance movement. A few were actively sectarian and members of the ardently anti Catholic Lodges of the Loyal Orange Institution, too.

A good example of the sort of protestant worker referred to above is Josiah Cocking. The son of an immigrant Cornish copper miner, a confirmed autodidact and a lifelong publicist in the cause of working people, he was strongly influenced by the Social Gospel movement. A convinced and militant Christian, he strongly agreed with the Salvation Army point of view on alcohol, tobacco, and gambling. But he was also an early and keen member of the Australian Socialist League and a very active trade unionist (Laffan in Cocking, 2003, 1).

A walk around these suburbs to day, though they are much changed in their socio economic status and ethnic mix, reveal many physical reminders of their working class (and Protestant past). There are: Methodist chapels, missions, and halls of almost cathedral like proportions; the soaring but crumbling spires of

Presbyterian churches; Salvation Army Citadels and a full spectrum of other non-conformist churches; and a wide range of lodge, temperance and union halls. There are friendly society dispensaries and at least one large cooperative society store. And, these are only those buildings that have survived.

Moreover, there are, in the sparse records that have survived of these Workingmen's Institutes, countless references to the following, as those bodies that made use of the Institutes' facilities: Freemasons, Odd fellows, Protestant Alliance, Order of Rechabites, Good Templars, Orange Lodges, Australian Protestant Defence Association, Sons and Daughters of Temperance, the Band of Hope, Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the NSW Temperance Alliance.

In addition as the table below and map following show, this more qualitative evidence is well borne out by an analysis of contemporary population statistics. All of the suburbs under study fall within predominantly protestant areas of the Sydney metropolitan area. Not only were these suburbs predominantly protestant, they were also more non-conformist protestant -- Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist, and Salvationist. However, while it is comparatively easy to draw these simple connections between these institutes and the protestant working class, it is much more difficult to explicate the multi faceted nature of this relationship particularly in regard to the organised labour movement. This is especially the case after the conscription split during the First World War, when the organised labour movement become more overtly Catholic and the role of the Protestant worker in that movement became even more problematic.

However, more definite answers to the questions raised in this paper must await further research.

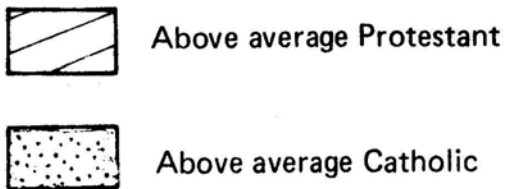
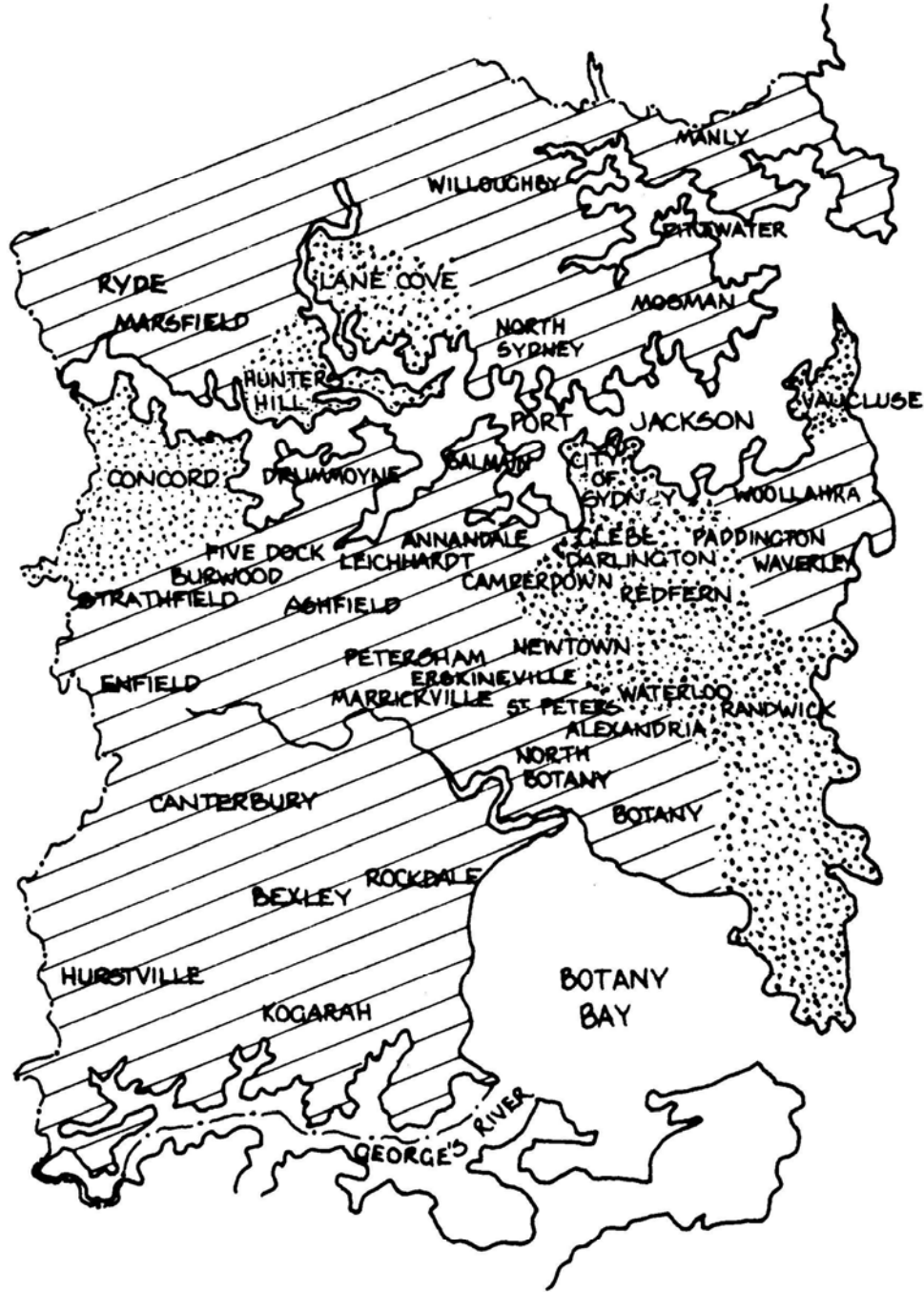
Table One

LOCALITY	Pop	CofE	RC	Meth	Pres	Cong	Bapt
CITY OF SYDNEY	112,137	43.5	34.9	4.3	6.6	1.5	0.7
BALMAIN	30,076	46.4	22.6	8.9	13.5	3.2	0.9
GLEBE	19,220	50.2	25.6	6.7	9.1	2.3	0.7
LEICHHARDT	17,454	45.9	19.1	10.7	10.7	4.5	2.1
NEWTOWN	22,598	50.7	18.4	9.9	8.3	3.2	2.1
SYDNEY METRO AREA	487,900	47.5	24.4	7.6	8.6	3.5	1.5

**THE PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS IN SELECTED
SUBURBS OF THE SYDNEY METROPOLITAN AREA
(1901 NSW CENSUS)**

Adapted from Appendix 2 (p 167) – Richard Broome (1980) *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Protestant Christianity in NSW Society 1900-1914*. St Lucia, The University of Queensland Press.

The Religious Distribution Within Sydney and Suburbs 1901*



Taken from: Richard Broome (1980) *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Protestant Christianity in NSW Society 1900-1914*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

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