

Working Class Learning One Hundred Years Ago: Workingmen's Institutes in Inner City Sydney

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Abstract: In the inner city neighborhoods of Sydney, some one hundred years ago, five workingmen's institutes were established. 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 social and educational lives of their working class communities. However, on a deeper level, 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 labor movement? This paper argues that the members of the Workingmen's Institutes were from a particular segment of the working class. Overwhelmingly, they appear to have been members of the protestant working class, which had a strong tradition of self-education and mutual self-improvement through an involvement with cooperative and fraternal organizations.

Introduction

Some of us are familiar with the term mechanics' institute; a few of us know an alternative term, school of arts. However, across Australia, a long list of other names was 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, people's institute, 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 neighborhoods of Sydney, their institutes or schools were generally styled as workingmen's institutes. It is the story 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 really mean union or labor education) is regarded as a sub field of adult education. It is generally 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 many activists used the terms adult education and workers' education 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 where these workingmen's institutes fitted into the broader story of Australian working class life is another question, which the second part of this paper attempts to address; albeit in an initial and a partial manner.

The Institutes

These institutes, in the neighborhoods of Balmain, Glebe, Leichhardt, Newtown, and Rozelle 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 nineteenth 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 to build (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 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 a six-table billiard room. (Solling & Reynolds, 1997, 40).

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. Later these premises were purchased and extensively re-built. The newly renovated building featured 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 (Norman, 1963, 71). The Leichhardt Workingmen's Institute was formed in 1904. The local member of the state Parliament had obtained the land and a 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). In 1907, the Balmain Municipality gained a second workingmen's institute, when the Rozelle Workingmen's Institute was built. The building cost about £1500 and contained a substantial lecture hall, a library, a reading room, a games room, meeting and classrooms, and a very large billiard room (Souvenir, 1910, 75).

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: 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 specialist 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. The Balmain Workingmen's Institute, still a most impressive feature of the Balmain streetscape, passed into private ownership and operates today as an arcade of shops and offices. The premises of the Glebe Workingmen's Institute were handed over to the City of Sydney Municipal Council in the early 1950s and for a number of years housed the local branch of the Public Library. Eventually, when a new library was built, the building was sold and redeveloped as an apartment building. The Leichhardt Institute survives and still operates, though the bulk of its building is leased on a long-term basis to an Italo-Australian social club. The Newtown Institute is still there and is still operating but with a much reduced and very elderly membership. The quite substantial building of the Rozelle Institute has also survived but also has passed into private ownership and today houses a group of related Tibetan Buddhist organizations.

Notwithstanding their eventual decline, for a great many years these workingmen's institutes were very important intellectual, social, civic, as well as recreational centres for their working class 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 neighborhood's children. And, of course billiards, cards, and other activities provided opportunities for relaxation and fellowship in an alcohol free environment.

A Deeper Look

While it would be patently untrue to claim that these Institutes arose as a direct product of militant proletarian consciousness, it also would not be true to claim that they were merely the creation of middle class paternalism (Drodge, 1988, 51). The situation, both in political and educational terms, was much more complex, as were the backgrounds and motivations of those actually involved, and, of course, the specific circumstances that surrounded the formation and continued operation of each of these Institutes varied somewhat.

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 its trade union and the parliamentary wings. Moreover, the whole political culture 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 housing developments that were then spreading along the new suburban railways and tramlines were marketed as being the "workingman's paradise".

The early years of the twentieth century was also 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 New South Wales 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. Public examinations were established for the new school awards: the Qualifying, Intermediate and Leaving Certificates. Teacher education was regularised and the state teachers' college established. Technical education was formalised and became part of the publicly controlled and funded system. The state's sole university was, at last, partially opened to talented working class scholars on the basis of merit.

The accepted academic wisdom sees the covert role of the workingmen's 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 employing class to use the institutes to save/reform/redirect the working class: then the institutes were indeed failures. However, it appears, from the reports of their working class members, that the Institutes did meet, at least to some extent, their needs for recreation, companionship, and intellectual stimulation. Thus, it can be argued that the institutes were, at the very least, modest successes (Morris, 2003, 162). The institutes did provide significant local venues for many of the activities of organised working class life. 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 segment of the working class: they largely seemed to have belonged to the protestant working class. The role of the protestant working class in the story of Australia has been little studied and much of the study, which has been done, has focussed on the most negative aspect of that role: that is anti Catholic sectarianism. Protestant workers 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, Presbyterians Congregationalists, 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 militant union members and loyal labor voters, were also orderly, respectable, home owning and chapel going. Some were, in addition, anti gambling and strong supporters of the temperance movement. While a few, it must be conceded, were actively sectarian and members of the ardently anti Catholic Lodges of the Loyal Orange Institution.

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 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. These are only those buildings that have survived. Moreover, there are, in the sparse records that have been retained of the activities of these Institutes, countless references to the following, as groups which made use of the Institutes' facilities: Freemasons, Odd fellows, the Protestant Alliance, Order of Recabites, 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.

Conclusion

This more impressionistic evidence is well borne out by an analysis of contemporary population statistics. All of the neighborhoods under study fall within the above average protestant population localities of the Sydney metropolitan area. Not only were these neighborhoods above average protestant; they were also heavily non-conformist protestant – Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist, and Salvationist (Broom, 1980, 167). 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 an issue that will be addressed more completely in ongoing research.

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