

Launch of Peter Coleman's – Memoirs of a Slow Learner

Tuesday 10th February 2015
Carlton, VIC

When I launched the first edition of this book, in 1994, I mostly dwelt on the journey of the Author. He describes his early life as “growing up radical”. His father, who worked in advertising, was “an apostle of modernity”. It was not just any old kind of modernism either. The author's father, Stanley Coleman, once worked for a newspaper – “The Age”! After divorce, he settled in Sydney where his son Peter Coleman joined him. The household was peppered with radical booklets and pamphlets. Peter went on to set a record in selling badges in the Sheepskins for Russia campaign.

At Sydney University – in the immediate post-war period – he was taken up with the prevailing leftist zeitgeist. He came under the influence of the ex and anti-communist Professor John Anderson – which probably saved him from the excesses of student marxism. By all accounts Anderson was a huge figure of influence on the University and the city at the time. At the launch of the first edition I described this memoir as a:-

“...journey through bohemianism and radicalism in postwar Sydney, through universities in Sydney, London and Canberra, and in and out of the lives of Australians of literary and artistic achievement like Robert Hughes, Bruce Beresford and Barry Humphries. In the background great intellectual wars were raging. There was the war against Stalinism and the struggle for the mind of postwar Europe – a story told by Peter in his book, *The Liberal Conspiracy* – internationally led by Arthur Koestler, Irving Kristol and Raymond Aron. There was the war against the Australian disciples of Stalinism waged stout-heartedly by European emigres such as Richard Krygier, Frank Knopfelmacher, Heinz Arndt and others. There was the literary war over the Ern Malley hoax and the academic war over Sydney Sparkes Orr.”

It is worth reading this book just to get a feel for who was doing what back in those days of the Cold War. It is a description of a world that younger Australians will find hard to believe, how a ruthless dictatorial ideology held sway over many people who regarded themselves as the “intelligentsia”. It would take forty years for the ideology to collapse in failure. As we walk through the world of arts and letters and bohemianism in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s we get an intriguing snapshot of emerging Australian writers and Artists.

Today I want to focus more on the aftermath of that journey which the author leaves off at the start of the 1960s. He has an air of pessimism. The icons of his youth are beginning to topple. His Academic hero, John Anderson is playing to undergraduate populism, the Church is losing to modernism and unable to explain its concerns in any coherent way. The principal defender of conservatism in Sydney is Warwick Fairfax in the Sydney Morning Herald!

No wonder there was defeatism in the air if our best hope of defending traditional values was the Sydney Morning Herald!

This new edition of the Memoirs of a Slow Learner includes an Appendix written in 2006 entitled “Leaves from the Diary of a Madman”, which takes up the story. The author finds a new purpose as a Parliamentary candidate, MP, and Minister. He embarks on a Parliamentary career in both State and Commonwealth Parliaments. He declares: “I am a Liberal Party liberal because I think the Liberal Party is the best expression of Australian liberalism...”

He is defeated at the State level and loses his seat. But that is followed by resurrection and eventual retirement at the Commonwealth level. It is not a bad record. Enoch Powell observed that: "All political careers end in failure." To get out before the voters finally lay you to rest is as good as one can hope for. The author comes to believe that politics is a virus that infects a person and renders them delirious. It cannot be cured, only managed. In times of remission temporary sanity prevails and opens an opportunity to get out of the fulltime parliamentary life on one's own terms.

Although he leaves politics as a full time paid career, the author is still infected by the political virus. Now at the age of 86 he writes a much read Column for Australian Spectator. He is a Judge on the Prime Minister's Literary Awards. Recently he stared down the Lion's Den on the ABC's Q and A program.

The author regards himself as a secular liberal. Of course there are great schisms within this group. On one hand there are the progressives, interventionists and liberationists. On the other there are sceptics, individualists and traditionalists. The Author is in the latter camp.

But let me return to the author's 1960s. The Church wanted to make a stand against moral relativism which it knew, instinctively, was hostile to the notion of revelation and moral absolutes. Academics were courting popularity and the Sydney Morning Herald was the bastion of Conservatism.

Things are much worse today. The Church no longer wants to engage against moral relativism, instead it largely echoes it. It does not think its relevance comes from opposing popular fads it thinks it comes from being in the vanguard of them.

At the recent Synod of the Melbourne Anglican Church, the delegates adjourned to be photographed under the banner that hangs from their Cathedral saying "Let's Fully Welcome Refugees". It does not have a banner declaring "Support for the Christians being crucified in Syria" or "Solidarity with the Churches being exterminated in Baghdad". It would consider that divisive or offensive to the multicultural multi-faith view it takes of the world.

In contrast, it would see taking on the Government over refugees as a unifying cause. It means standing together with all those who read *The Age* and listen to the ABC, just like them.

After being photographed under the refugee banner the Synod reconvened to decide how it could reduce its shareholding in fossil fuel companies. There was no discernible difference in the media coverage given to the Anglican Synod compared to that of the Greens State convention.

These days, far from being the defenders of traditional or conservative values, the Age and the Sydney Morning Herald lead the fight against them. The Church knows it will be attacked by the papers if it takes a traditional position and widely praised if gets "progressive." To use modern parlance, this is a no-brainer. If you think positive media coverage is a mark of relevance and success you should get with the program.

Back in the 1960s Academics were courting celebrity from undergraduate audiences. But the Universities didn't have a Press Office and a Marketing Manager like the Universities of today. We now have Universities taking huge billboard display advertising to publicize their marketing slogans. Universities take out radio advertising and hire super boxes at Sporting Stadiums to promote themselves and promote enrolment. They go to enormous effort to recruit overseas students because they can charge them higher fees and generate more revenue for their huge enterprises. They [correctly] describe this as earning export income. Celebrity Academics are a wonderful way of promoting a University and its profile. This is a

media obsessed world, this world of Twitter and Facebook. Hits and traffic can be used to measure success more quantitatively than things like rigour and independence.

Outside this hoo-ha I hope there is still a place for the conscientious Academic who thinks their most important role is to open up inquiring minds, just as there are faithful Clergy who think it is their purpose to minister to souls without being distracted by the obvious failures of organized religion. There are people who still like to think a University should be a place of learning rather than an export industry. This goes to values. Values are deeper than politics.

Secular liberalism may well be an organising principle for public life, but can it speak to and explain our deepest values about learning and art, or our deepest questions about life and death? Our Author knows that the credo of secular liberalism is not as robust as he once thought it was. He is, he says, still in conversation about it.

Peter Coleman's fellow Quadrant Editor and great mentor, the poet James McAuley, thought that the whole edifice of secular liberalism was unsustainable. He put his faith in God. Back in the 1960s Peter Coleman told us the he was only one step ahead of the Hound of Heaven. It would be interesting to know if he is still on the run. One last chapter is still to be written about this!

Congratulations to Peter Coleman on the republication of this very readable and interesting volume of cultural history, and, to Connor Court on this handsome volume. I wish it every success.