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ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

## One Small World: On Writing Independent History

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*One Small World* is a history that was independently written and funded through a series of grants. In my mind it was a history of place, about nine acres in Marrickville and the people who lived on it; a history of a small world in microcosm. It is impossible, however, to ignore that it was also a history of an organisation, the Addison Road Community Centre (ARCCO).<sup>1</sup> That relationship has been just as tricky to negotiate as if it was a commissioned history. I have an office at the Centre where I am a tenant. This article explores the dilemmas of maintaining an independent historical voice while writing for a community of which you are a part.

The Centre has had an ambivalent relationship to its past. Part of Gadigal country, in 1916 it became an army depot. For sixty years it was a centre for a loyal, Anglo and largely working-class community. It was where young men trained with the militia, where they enrolled for war and were demobbed afterwards. But the depot also developed a strong relationship with the community it was embedded in. Army practise elsewhere was to keep its distance from the community. But in Marrickville the depot became a local social hub for dances, sport, and a magnet for young women.

In the 1960s migrants began moving into Marrickville, and it is easy to forget that this was not entirely welcomed by an older Anglo community. In 1969, the Marrickville RSL decided that only English would be spoken inside the club. This was a local event that became a flash point right across New South Wales.<sup>2</sup>

In 1976 it became a community centre for migrant, arts and welfare groups. The army's whitewashed huts were painted with murals and transformed into offices, childcare centres and theatres. But the history of the huts belonged to a different community. It was not a shared past. As Leo Foster, a Commonwealth public servant said at the time, 'the army had little effect on the community – the real discussion was about when the community moved in'.<sup>3</sup> He was wrong. But what he was creating was a blank slate for better things. The strict

discipline of the army had been replaced by a very different ethos and political outlook; in fact, its antithesis.

That was coupled with a strong anti-war commitment among many members. I was talking to Art Resistance, a progressive video production group, after I had discovered their building had been the office for the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) in the 1940s. On sharing this news I was told quite briskly: 'We're not interested in war.' So we talked about the leaky roof instead. This was not unusual. Another member was concerned that history would inevitably celebrate war. I left that conversation with a sense he would prefer no history of the Centre at all.

Members who had been formed by anti-conscription protests, or those who had fled military dictatorships or civil war, were uneasy about becoming the guardians of an army history with all its conservative and militaristic overtones. And in some respects it was a concern I shared. I had no special interest in army history. And like many historians I felt uneasy about celebrations for the centenary of ANZAC. The Centre's dilemma is even more confronting – how to handle the paradox of occupying army huts and drill halls created for war by groups who are politically committed to protest and peace.

That ambivalence has had several consequences. The site was listed on Marrickville's Local Environment Plan as having local heritage significance. But this fails to fully appreciate its value. The depot was a major suburban centre for both the militia and the regular army. During World War Two it was the New South Wales Leave and Transit Depot. During the Korean War it was the Eastern Command Personnel depot. During Vietnam it registered nationals service conscripts and Save Our Sons staged their first major protests at the gates. As a community centre, it was an early multicultural experiment that pre-dated neighbourhood centres. There is an argument that the site has been significant to the state of New South Wales.

But the public memory of the site was being lost. In 1976, the 14th Field Brigade building burnt down. This was where the Saturday night dances had been held since the 1920s and was considered the most beautiful building on site. Once gone, the memory of it went too. For some time a photograph by Sam Hood was thought to be the Old Tote Theatre at Kensington. But with archival records and the help of Norman Denovan who grew up behind the depot it was identified instead as being the 14th Field Brigade hut at the Addison Road Military Depot. The photograph had been taken at a polo match in 1934.<sup>4</sup> Current members had similar difficulties with keeping their organisation's past. When the Casa Latina hut burnt down the organisation lost their entire archive of photographs and records. Only one organisation, Ethnic Community Child Care, has published a commemorative history about its last thirty years.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, Addison Road has a distinctive sense of place that triggers powerful memories. Gary Smith operated a cherry picker and when he was sent to Addison Road he was thunderstruck. This was where he had been called up as a conscript for the Vietnam War in 1970. He rang his mother to check and then broke down crying. He abandoned work for the day and went to Bondi to look at the ocean.<sup>6</sup>

The dilemma for the Centre was when people turned up at the office wanting to talk about their memories. No-one quite knew what to do with them. A series of co-ordinators kept suggesting that I might want to look into its history. But when a particularly poisonous internal argument erupted another tenant, Graham Chalcraft, and I felt we had collected

enough material over the years to do a walking tour. It seemed to us that talking about its history might help repair the site in a difficult time.

This became the groundwork for a new engagement by Addison Road in its history. A new coordinator developed plans to turn it into a Living Museum and a destination in Sydney for tourists and school groups. And in many respects this has been valuable. But when the organisation became engaged in its history it veered off into mythology, made possible in the first instance by an ANZAC Centenary grant.

In 2015, ARCCO staged *Tails from the Past* to celebrate the horses of the Light Brigade that served in war.<sup>7</sup> It was an interesting choice to focus on the horse, rather than the soldier. Commemorating the cruel treatment of horses in war was a way of dissolving ambivalence and re-connecting with an army past. But when the Centre went on Facebook to claim that ‘the Addison Road Army depot is the most significant ANZAC site in Marrickville if not all of Australia’, I alerted them that the depot was still being built and only opened in 1916.<sup>8</sup>

Just what the depot did in World War One was, then, a blank-spot in the research. It had been established that Addison Road sent recruits to the Middle East and France from 1916. But there is no evidence that there were horses at the depot. Unfortunately, it wasn’t enough to stop the local federal member from claiming, in Parliament, that the event he had attended at ARCCO had commemorated the Light Horse and that both ‘diggers and their horses’ spent time at the Addison Road army barracks. Once lodged, the story keeps popping up: Addison Road was apparently the base for the Light Horse Brigade.<sup>9</sup>

The readiness to grab an ANZAC grant with one hand and a conflated history with the other missed something more important. The real value of horses at Addison Road was not in war but in peace. It was after the war in the 1920s and 1930s that there is plenty of evidence that horses were stabled at the depot and were important to the community. They gave jobs and meaning to injured and unemployed ex-servicemen. They performed at the depot’s gymkhanas, entertained thousands and helped to repair a community that had been damaged first by World War One and then a very long great depression in the 1930s. The trick riding was spectacular entertainment that is still very well remembered.<sup>10</sup>

But that narrative was outside the terms of the ANZAC grant. So what is the role of a historian here? Is it to be a grumpy pedant, the person who tramples over an energetic response to the past? And if a grant produces something that mostly benefits the community then does it matter if the narrative is skewed slightly? Ultimately, my conclusion was that there were good reasons for a book.

The other mythology was one closer to the present – the foundational story of the Community Centre itself. It has long been held by the Centre that its creation was an act of heroic migrant activism, echoed in a recent paper by a staff person who claimed that it took ‘a long community struggle to gain control of the site via informal occupation and activity’ and that this created ‘one of the most radical multicultural organisations in Australia.’<sup>11</sup>

The archives reveal a different political history. It could easily be argued that the Department of Urban and Regional Development, headed by Minister Tom Uren, was not just influential in creating the centre, but its principal and necessary instrument. It was such a long struggle it took at the most six months. DURD inserted itself into the handover by holding off both the local federal member, Fred Daly, and Marrickville Council who both wanted the site for low-cost housing and aged-care units. Then it took the entire question out of their hands and created what it called a community study.<sup>12</sup>

The study meant that government proposals were given no more weight or consideration than any other. Community groups gained a hearing and legitimacy that they would have struggled to have achieved otherwise. As Tom Uren explained to an extremely irate Fred Daly, the site represented ‘an opportunity which may never be repeated’.<sup>13</sup>

Leo Foster – a public servant in a leather coat – was DURD’s man on the ground and he was crucial. He did more than just survey opinion and make recommendations. Foster held a series of meetings and within two months had winnowed the proposals down to one. He then organised the lease and steered the handover during an immensely challenging political environment, which included the dismissal of the Whitlam Federal Labor Government in November 1975 and DURD’s abolition.<sup>14</sup>

The other major component of the community study was a survey of the Marrickville local government area (LGA), and its fate indicates something of DURD’s determination to see that a community centre was created. The survey was a considerable exercise: 1300 people were interviewed in five languages across the Marrickville LGA about their preferences for the site; 500 of these people lived on Addison Road. The majority in both the LGA and on Addison Road wanted the site for either shopping or housing, with sporting/recreational uses figuring as a second preference. Shopping was particularly supported by people with an ethnic background. These were unexpected results and the survey was not published until June 1976, after the community centre was established. It is striking to see Forster’s draft report where he deletes the word ‘enthusiastic’ to describe the community’s response and suggests some other word should be used.<sup>15</sup>

The cost of DURD’s central planning was that no-one – not Leo Foster, DURD, or Marrickville Council – believed the Community Centre would ever be permanent. There was no commitment to it beyond the year. The Centre was given a twelve-month lease that was then shortened to six. And it struggled for years as a result. Losing several huts to fire in its early years was one of those costs. Even today, the Centre is haunted by a belief that it is only temporary and could be sold off at any time, even though a fifty-year lease was negotiated in 2008.<sup>16</sup>

The challenge for the book was how to fit the archival evidence, most of which happened behind-the-scenes and was unknown to locals, with stories from people who were there. But oral history is not transparent either. One of my early interviews was with the Centre’s long-time president, the historical touchstone in the Centre. I believed she had been involved in its creation. It was only after a very long interview that I realised she was not in Marrickville at the time. She had arrived later. But she was the link; she knew the first committee and their stories, and had passed them on as if they were her own.<sup>17</sup>

It was a Royal Australian Historical Society Heritage grant that provided the time to identify and interview some of the key people who were involved at the start: the Turkish Welfare Association; the Good Neighbour Council in Newtown; the Greek Residents Association; Rigas Feraios; and Reverse Garbage. It is hard in interviews forty years later to track down exactly what happened when. Archival documents will always be more precise. What the interviewees wanted to talk about most was why the centre was important and what it meant. And those stories bring their own imperative: to honour that experience and make sure they are a part of the historical narrative.

While individuals had been involved in trying to establish a centre in 1975, wider community enthusiasm did not emerge until later. Once occupied, the first tenants often put in hours of work to renovate the huts. And for those organisations it became both an important

gathering place and a refuge in an English-speaking community. Unaware of government opinion that considered the Centre temporary, they succeeded over four decades to make it permanent.

Before the book was published I asked the Centre to read the last chapter. The administration is changing; it is no longer a collective of volunteers as it was in the 1970s. Understanding just what the structure is now was at the heart of the discussion. If this had been a commissioned history I have no doubt that at this point I would have been obliged to feature a roll call of the Centre's current projects and rationale.

It was left to me to find a way through; it was my call. But to what extent was a dilemma sidestepped? The book essentially ends at 1980 and skips everything since, in particular the corruption of the late 1980s. It was not just because the people involved refused to be interviewed since there is enough of a paper trail to make a start. But as fascinating as it might be to explore inner city politics and the Australian Labor Party, it was hard to justify. The book was not about the Centre's internal politics – going down that track would have skewed the narrative and perspective. This was intended as a history of place, about how a piece of land was the centre of a community, even before it became a community centre. If that sidestepped a dilemma, then we were probably both pleased.

In many respects the Centre is well placed in the future to talk about a different army history and what happened away from the heroics of the battlefield. What is less clear is what multiculturalism has meant at ARCCO. While the Centre is attached to the story of its radical origins through heroic migrant activism, it is unlikely that DURD, or a leather-coated public servant, will figure in any public history that comes from ARCCO. Yet it is worth remembering that the multiculturalism practised at the Centre in those first years was both ethnically *and* politically diverse.

The Turkish Welfare Association, which was deeply conservative, was in a hut next to Rigas Feraios which had ties to the Communist Party. Rigas Feraios was located next to the Greek Residents Association which had connections to the Greek Orthodox Church. Across the grass was the Women's Refuge hut. This was a volatile mix and at management meetings political opinions were strongly held and loudly argued. Yet Vietnamese groups never became tenants at ARCCO even though in the 1980s Marrickville became overwhelmingly Vietnamese. Today, just two out of forty-three tenants provide services to migrants. That, too, says something about Marrickville. Multiculturalism is possibly more complex than has been acknowledged.

Whether a book written without the constraints of a commission produces a different history is for others to judge. The experience of writing it offered a chance to follow my curiosity, my sense of logic and commitment to the sources and for that wonderful opportunity I am a lot poorer as a result.

## Endnotes

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3. Leo Forster, Gwen Taylor, Julie Jones, *Marrickville community study report*, 1976, p22, Marrickville Library, Local History Collection, Vertical Files.

4. National Archives of Australia, SP1715, P76/483, Marrickville Transfer of Army lands, Part 2, Forster, 23 February 1976. Photograph: Sam Hood, Military polo at Marrickville, SLNSW, Home and Away, 649-654, 2878.
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8. Addison Road Community Centre, Facebook, 13 October 2014. Sue Castrique, email to Rosanna Barbero, 14 January 2015.
9. Anthony Albanese, *Australian Parliamentary Debates, Hansard, House of Representatives*, 28 May 2015, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=CHAMBER;id=chamber%2Fhansardr%2F832d97e7-5731-4e03-b7e4-02ee76be9d56%2F0066;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansardr%2F832d97e7-5731-4e03-b7e4-02ee76be9d56%2F0000%22>, accessed 17 December 2018.
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11. Mathilde Montpetit, 'The death of a multicultural Australia', *Overland*, no233, Summer, 2018, <https://overland.org.au/2018/05/the-death-of-a-multicultural-australia/>, accessed 13 December 2018.
12. NAA, SP1715, P76/483, Part 2, 'Report on the interdepartmental study group on the future use of the former army reserve training depot, Marrickville, NSW', 30 June 1976, Attachment A.
13. NAA, SP1715, P76/483, Part 1, Uren to Daly, nd and 13 May, 2 June, 27 October 1975.
14. Public advertisements calling for ideas from the community were placed in newspapers in August 1975 and the decision was made 30 October 1975. NAA, SP1715/P76/483, Part 1, Telex, 30 October 1975. Forster, Taylor and Jones, *Marrickville community study report*, p127.
15. NAA: SP1715, P76/483, Part 2, Forster, 'Uses of army land, Addison Road, Marrickville, Survey results' and Forster, 'Report on the interdepartmental study group', p4.
16. NAA, SP1715, P76/483, Part 1, DURD to Forster, 30 October 1975 and Part 2, Forster, 'Report on the interdepartmental study group', pp2-3
17. Vivi Koutsounadis, interview with Sue Castrique, ARTHP, 20 September 2013.