

Brotherhood history launch**Mark Peel****21/11/08**

I want first of all to congratulate Richard and Colin for writing a history of the Brotherhood, and congratulate the Brotherhood for wanting it to be written: it is not always an easy thing to let historians loose on your records and archives, let alone on your reputation, for we can be a rather unruly and pernicky lot. But it is important to have histories, especially of an organisation such as the Brotherhood, and to have historians write them. Good historians bring important tools to such a task: the modesty of the broader and longer view, the sense of context and of moment, the concern for the shaping of a story, and an eye for the larger significance of their subject. They also, I think, bring a sense of hope, both in terms of the importance of the past but also in terms of the connections between past, present and future. It's a funny thing, but some people think being an historian makes you a pessimist. On the contrary, and speaking at least for myself, being an historian makes me an optimist and an idealist. History shows the capacity for change, and the power of well-made arguments and powerful ideas. It shows the strength of words. It emphasises the power of the forces that generate injustice, but it also shows injustice being met, matched and confronted. Hearts are moved, minds are changed, and what was once impossible to imagine doing becomes impossible to imagine doing without. Most of all, history shows worlds being made, and what is made can be unmade and remade.

As an historian, I think the past is important, and I think the most accurate story you can tell about the past is important, because history is not fiction and history tells the truth. If this makes historians rather bad companion at 'historical movies', it also gives us very important responsibilities to the public of which we are members. And part of that responsibility, in my view, is to listen for the voices that offer the most effective challenge to complacency, who tell that part of the truth few people want to hear, who remember what others want to forget. Truthful history also challenges the notion that the past is somehow over, that what's past is past. History is not 'was' but 'is'. Unlike nostalgia, history isn't comfortable. It doesn't make you relaxed. For this reason, too, good history is one of our strongest defences against resignation: the idea that things never change, that there's nothing you can do, that the world can't be altered.

It is this, too, that makes histories of an organisation such as the Brotherhood so important and so welcome. This is not the first time that this history has been traced, and I think especially here of the articles brought together in *Looking Forward, Looking Back* in 1993, of Graeme Davison's *The Compassionate Eye* and, most recently, Alison McClelland's meticulous survey of how the Brotherhood changed and was changed by understandings of poverty since the 1930s. But to me the fact that others have spoken and written before highlights the significance of the Brotherhood's work and the persistent need for histories of that work, what it represents and what it aims to do. The Brotherhood has always played a very important part in Melbourne and Victoria's welfare, indeed Australia's welfare. We will all of us have our own connections with it, and you will soon hear from two people whose connections are more intimate than mine. This history is particularly welcome for me not because I have played any role in the Brotherhood's work, but because of what that work has inspired in me. In the 1990s, when I embarked on a taxing and sometimes fraught project to listen to hundreds of people living in poverty, and in the first part of this decade, when I struggled to properly, respectfully and adequately capture the wisdom and knowledge of those people in the book I was writing, I always drew much heart from the work of researchers here, from Jenny Trethewey and Jan Carter through to Janet Taylor's Understanding Poverty Project and beyond. For me, then, the Brotherhood's significance has been for the questions it brings to the study of poverty, marginalisation and inequality, and for the way in which it has grounded its research and advocacy in lived experience. If I can borrow something from Alison McClelland, the Brotherhood has always, in my view, managed to bring together past and present responses and to shape future ones without ever being swayed from its commitment to bear witness and, as vigorously as it can and sometimes as vigorously as it dares, to stay true to the idea of social justice. It has always seen research, advocacy, policy and services as parts of the same work, rather than discrete operations best protected from each other.

It has helped keep visible a simple idea: that poverty's solutions don't lie in emphasising the obligations of the poor to the rich, but in emphasising the obligations of the rich to the poor. And it has always reminded more or less friendly others that the task is poverty's eradication, not poverty's management. Some will see this as an impossible idealism, as utopian and naïve. But I think it's important for us to hold our nerve, and to think about the arguments we need to make to convince our fellow citizens that what we have now is not what has to be. One of the great problems of the last decade, in my view, has been a lack of idealism. To paraphrase Hugh Stretton, there have been too few hard heads and soft hearts, too many hard hearts and soft heads. Idealism, hope and a regard for justice won't always take us in the same directions, but at least it takes us somewhere other than the tired and tiring mistake that the job is changing poor people, rather than changing what produces and reproduces their poverty.

What the Brotherhood does, what histories of the Brotherhood can do, and what I have tried to manage myself, is to understand the importance of the truth you hear on the margins, where things are often clearer than they are at the centre, and where the shape of things to come has always been more easily understood. And to make convincing arguments, we first need to listen. Listen to the people who have lost the most, the people who have paid a price—in blasted hopes and dreams—for the comforts of others. We need to listen not out of sympathy or compassion, but because they have much to tell us. So-called ‘losers’ know things about the world that winners don't. There are things that being privileged doesn't teach you. From the lowest rung, you see things that aren't visible from the top or the centre. If the shape of a society looks justified, natural and commonsensical to those born or elevated to its leadership, how much more important are the perspectives of those deemed suitable only to be led. The unlucky know more of the world and its vulnerabilities than the lucky; the weak have a far better sense of what matters than the strong. To comprehend the importance of housing or health or employment, listen to the unhoused, the unwell and the unemployed.

Histories are about the past, but they are always and ever about the present and the future. A history of the Brotherhood is a history of what was, what is and what might become, and it especially welcome for that. The book's title, *Divine Discontent*, is perhaps even more important than Glenn and Colin could have known. The need for good histories of social advocacy, social action and social justice is perhaps as urgent now as it has been for a long time. We will need arguments about possibility and precariousness, frailty and failure, stories about what's gone wrong and what might make it right. After all, the people of the future will have much to ask of us, and we should be considering our answers. They will want to know when and how it was forgotten that a society's measure is not the fortunes of its richest but the chances afforded its poorest. They will want to know why the inequalities of class and generation were allowed to widen so far and so quickly. And they will want to know who stood and spoke against this. Here, in this book, and in the organisation whose story it tells, they will find some of their answers.