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# An Activist For All Seasons

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# An Activist For All Seasons

## **Abstract**

During his lifetime Robert Daniel "Bob" Walshe (1923-2018) was many things, variously factory labourer, soldier, communist, organiser, activist, pamphleteer, teacher, editor, publisher, historian, educationist, environmentalist. He was the author/co-author/editor of some forty books.

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## AN ACTIVIST FOR ALL SEASONS.

by Rowan Cahill

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During his lifetime Robert Daniel “Bob” Walshe (1923-2018) was many things, variously factory labourer, soldier, communist, organiser, activist, pamphleteer, teacher, editor, publisher, historian, educationist, environmentalist. He was the author/co-author/editor of some forty books.

Born in Sydney’s Eastern suburbs in 1923, Walshe once described his family life as “not very harmonious”. His father, a milkman in the Bondi area, was a severely wounded World War 1 veteran, in and out of hospital during the 1920s. To his mother, Walshe credited his lifelong love of books. Outdoors there was joy, and Walshe, his two brothers and sister enjoyed their childhoods in the environs of Bondi and Bronte beaches, and Waverley Park.

Leaving school at 14, Walshe obtained labouring work in a butter factory, which he hated, then work with another employer as a clerk on the proviso he undertook a correspondence accountancy course, which he also hated. World War 11 came as a relief and at 18 he signed up at the Holsworthy Camp (Sydney) as a cook, before joining the AIF when he turned 19. After training, he was assigned to an Ambulance unit in Darwin where he saw out the war. His brothers also signed up, his elder brother captured in the Fall of Singapore, spending the rest of the war as a POW in Japan.

With about one in six Australian soldiers actually seeing action against the enemy, military authorities resolved to fill their spare time with activities, and an innovative program of liberal education was introduced. This was delivered by the Army Education Service via lectures and a huge range of cultural activities, and *Salt*, a popular topical/current affairs/literary journal. Both enterprises became sites of communist activity. During the war thousands of members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) joined the armed forces, estimations ranging from between 4000-6000. Following the legalisation of the CPA in 1942, communists in the Army operated more or less openly, and within the bounds of military regulations conducted leftist meetings, circulated communist literature, and recruited members. Walshe was radicalised in this milieu and joined the party.

### POST-WAR RETRAINING

Demobilised, Walshe had a brief stint as a farm worker, then took advantage of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme designed to help integrate discharged members of the armed forces back into civilian life. Enthused by the cultural activities he had been exposed to in the army he decided to further his education, matriculating (Sydney Technical College, 1946), then attending Sydney University (1947-51) and graduating with Honours in History and the Diploma in Education. From then until 1964 he taught English and History in secondary schools in the Sutherland Shire south of Sydney.

During the late 1940s, newly weds Bob and wife Pat (née McEvoy), a nurse, moved to the Sutherland Shire, a favourite destination amongst Sydney lefties. In those days it was on the outskirts of Sydney, connected to the city by rail, land was cheap, and relaxed local regulations permitted owner-builders

to erect simple wooden framed fibro clad dwellings, and live in them as they completed a house. The Walshes stayed in the Shire for the rest of their lives, Pat dying in 1989 after 42 years together.

At university, Walshe significantly developed his organisational skills, primarily as President of the NSW Council of Reconstruction Trainees, an outfit he had a role in organising, its aim to operate as a trade union and protect and advance the welfare and interests of the thousands of ex-service trainees undergoing studies. He was successful and effective in this role, and engaged in lobbying at the highest levels with politicians and bureaucrats. During this time he produced a 46-page booklet titled *Student Work for Progress* (1947). Its recommendations about how to successfully organise from below have not dated, while his advocacy for females and arguments against what he termed the “mid-Victorian conception (of the) essential inferiority” of women were well ahead of the time.

In July 1947 Walshe was amongst the fourteen students arrested during a protest in support of Indonesian nationalism outside the Dutch Consulate in Margaret Street, Sydney. A photo of Walshe being arrested by members of the thuggish Squad 21 was prominent in the *Daily Telegraph's* coverage of the protest. When Walshe appeared in court, he was wearing his ex-service association badge. According to historian Alan Barcan, Walshe's main concern about being arrested was if his future mother-in-law saw the newspaper photo; he feared her negative reaction.

### **TEACHER AT LARGE**

As a school teacher Walshe was instrumental in helping organise the History Teachers' Association (NSW), and was its Chairman 1962-63. Curriculum change was in the air as the influence of Sydney University's conservative historian Sir Stephen Roberts was replaced by new curriculum thinking in NSW. In time for the early 1960s, and arguably helping radicalise a generation, the new Leaving Certificate (senior school) History course aimed at understanding the 'modern world' from the Enlightenment onwards. Innovatively, much of the world beyond Europe was included. Economic history was introduced, and terms like liberalism, fascism, communism, nationalism studied. The notion of 'class' also got a run. The curriculum encouraged the study of cause and effect, and emphasised the idea that study of the past could help one understand the present. In the hands of teachers who were up to it, student initiative and research beyond set-texts was encouraged.

Some best-selling and long-lasting texts emerged from the ranks of this generation of HTA teachers: the two volumes of *World History Since 1789* edited by James Hagan (later Professor James Hagan, Wollongong University, doyen labour historian), and *The Student's Guide to World History* by Walshe. First published in 1962, Walshe's book was revised four times, reprinted eight times, and encouraged a self-directed approach to the subject and its processes. The last revised edition was in 1980. Published accounts of lessons by HTA members during its early years indicate teaching techniques and initiatives that would still be regarded as innovative and dynamic two decades later.

Initially Walshe could not find a publisher for his *Student's Guide*, so he self-published. Emboldened by the success of the book he formed his own company, Martindale Press (Sydney) in 1963, and left classroom teaching. With Martindale he embarked on an innovative, extensive and successful programme of educational and academic publishing before selling the company to an international publishing interest in 1970. Martindale illustrates a solution constant in Walshe's life: if there is a blockage of some kind, and you can't get somebody to fix it, then figure out a way forward and do it yourself.

While not privy to his financial situation, it is apparent post-Martindale that Walshe's need for full-time employment was no longer a necessity. Gradually, then fully, volunteer activities took over. Further, from my dealings with him and from watching him work, including him commissioning me to revise the final edition of his *Student's Guide* (Longmans 1980), when endeavours he deemed worthwhile needed funds or help with operational/equipment costs, the money became available.

### **WRITING RADICAL HISTORY**

Within the CPA Walshe was recognised as a significant intellectual talent, and his historical skills were utilised. While still teaching full-time he produced a series of detailed historical notes for leftist trade unions on events like Eureka Stockade, the 8-Hour Day, the Tolpuddle Martyrs. In 1954 he had a key role in organising Sydney's celebrations for the Centennial Commemoration of the Eureka Stockade uprising. For this he produced a 32-page booklet on the Eureka events and their significance, and two original and significant pieces of scholarly research on Eureka published in the scholarly journal *Historical Studies of Australia and New Zealand* (1954). These latter are still being cited by historians. Walshe's interest in Eureka was life-long. He later produced a book (2005) on the uprising as part of Australia's democratic evolution, revisiting and extending his original research. From 2004 onwards was a main facilitator of the annual commemoration of Eureka in Sydney.

In 1956 Walshe produced a 62-page booklet on the radical origins of Australian democracy, *Australia's Fight for Independence and Parliamentary Democracy*. As Terry Irving and I have argued, in these booklets and some 90-pages, Walshe laid down the foundations for the radical study of democracy in Australia, the common thread the idea of popular struggle. At that time the new profession of academic history writing paid little attention to Australia, dissolving our history into that of Britain. The development of government organisations in the nineteenth century colonies was called 'the coming of self-government', as if it were a natural process. There was little interest in seeing the process as a contest between the colonies and Britain, and even less on seeing it as contested within Australia.

Writing to me in 2012, Walshe explained his approach to history. Historians, he wrote, need to find "times in the past when the best of humanity, struggling against privilege, greed, oppression, war, find reason to affirm again the confident humanism of the Enlightenment, its critical rationalism, its exciting science, its faith in giving direction by democratic agency to society's incessant change, thereby to release energy in a reader to be active in the cause of human betterment".

### **1956 AND ALL THAT**

Bob was a voracious and active reader. Seldom did he read without pen and paper at hand, underlining sections of text, making marginal notes, inserting notepaper comments to himself, all duly dated so he could keep track of his own thoughts. He read widely, each reading a deep engagement. This was a lifetime habit. A few garage boxes of publications (books, journals, pamphlets) he gave to me from the 1950s, show that his reading at the time went well beyond the narrow confines of literature many CPA members limited themselves to, an international mix including writings by ex-communist and Trotskyists. Bob once claimed his questioning of communism went back to 1951, and I do not doubt this. But one did not give up on an organisation if you believed there was a chance of changing things from within.

In 1956 things came to a head. In February that year Premier Krushchev delivered a 'secret speech' to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union criticising Stalin and exposing his crimes. The speech was reprinted in full by the *New York Times* in July, and the CPA tried to suppress discussion of it. Many CPA members regarded it as a forgery. Jim Staples (later Justice Staples of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission), a close comrade of Walshe, obtained a copy of the article, and together they studied it. Satisfied it was not a forgery, they did their utmost within the party to have it discussed openly. The final straw was when they republished the speech in an 80-page roneod booklet and circulated it within the party. Both were subsequently expelled, part of an unwilling and willing exodus of people that decimated the ranks of the CPA.

Adrift in many ways, post-1956 Walshe read widely on religion and philosophy, embarking on an intellectual and spiritual quest akin to that evident in *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946) by Aldous Huxley, an intellectual Walshe regarded highly. During the 1980s Walshe found intellectual sustenance in journals produced by scholars and practitioners of humanistic psychology. The outcome of his quest was the creation of a personal inner sense of peace-in-conflict, of centeredness, and stability. Keys to its maintenance involved dialogues with himself via regular private journal entries, and frequent, if not daily, sojourns with nature, walking/strolling in the bushlands of the Sutherland Shire.

Walshe's time in the CPA was a significant teacher, and he left with principles that informed the rest of his life: that organisation was the key to effecting change in the face of the intractable; that a small cadre group could have impacts beyond its size; that collective action was the way to bring about social change and address issues of concern; and key to all of this was the centrality of the printed word – in all organisations Walshe was subsequently involved with, the printed/published word figured prominently, as a means of creating a sense of community, and as an educational and organising/mobilising tool.

### **THE WRITING PROCESS**

Beginning in 1969, Walshe began teaching writing to adults in what became popular classes at the Sutherland Shire Evening College. Since his post-war student days and as a writer/activist, teacher and publisher, he had given considerable thought to *writing*, coming to see it as a process and not as a one-shot wonder. Writing was also a means of gaining self-knowledge, and integral to an individual's thought processes. In short, writing was personally empowering. Further, it was through engaging in the writing process that language skills and literary appreciation could be developed.

For Walshe, writing should be a democratic process; everyone could be a writer – it was not a process just for elites and specialists. Demanding yes, but not impossible. During the 1970s he became influenced by the paradigm shifting work of American educationist Donald H Graves (1930-2010) who had also come to these sorts of conclusions.

Subsequently Walshe developed and promulgated his ideas and approaches via two organisations he was instrumental in helping form. Within the English Teachers' Association of NSW (ETA), The English Teachers' Writing Group, a small, informal, ginger group of classroom practitioners he chaired, that met during the 1970s to write and to discuss 'writing' and teaching practice generally. Walshe had a dictum: if you were to teach students how to write, you too had to be 'a writer'. One demonstrated in the doing, not by the saying. In one way or another, the members of this group

subsequently influenced classroom and curriculum practice through their own published writings, editorial initiatives, conferences, and careers.

Not that Walshe was universally popular. He invited me to join the Writing Group during the early 1970s, having liked an article I had published in the *ETA Newsletter*. I was a young classroom teacher at the time, new to the school teaching game. The invitation by letter turned up out of the blue, and I mentioned it to my Head Teacher. He advised me not to associate with Walshe; it was a bad career move he reckoned. So I accepted the invitation, and went to the peaceful cloistered environs of St Scholastica's College in Glebe, Sydney, where the outfit met once a month on Friday evenings. The Group was 'catholic' in the secular meaning of the term, drawn from state and private institutions, denominational and secular, a manifestation of Bob's embracive ability to work with diversities of people in the achieving change. Meeting up with Bob, becoming part of the Group, and my subsequent association with him, were life-changing.

But it was through The Primary English Teachers' Association (PETA) that Walshe had most impact. From 1972-83 he was honorary editor for PETA. During this time a flood of attractive publications and teaching aids, accessible in terms of language and price, streamed from PETA into the nation's primary and secondary classrooms. Variousy authored, edited, or commissioned by Walshe, the majority of this material gave voice to classroom practitioners, their contributions prominently credited. In his own right, Walshe became regarded as an authority on the teaching of writing, his work cited nationally and internationally in teaching and scholarly publications, influencing curriculum changes in Australia well into the 1980s. Eventually Walshe's approach was skittled by neoliberal educational changes, 'genre' based approaches to the teaching of writing, the impact of postmodernism on school curriculums, and by the dictatorship of 'testing'.

Walshe's roles in the HTA in the 1950s, and later in PETA were manifestations of his belief and insistence that curriculum creation, development, implementation, and teaching practice, should not be left to, nor regarded as the preserves of, elites of politicians, bureaucrats, academic experts. Education should not be a top-down process; teachers should have a major and active part in these processes too, as creators/contributors from below, from the grassroots.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM**

By the early 1970s, Walshe had become concerned about environmental issues. Environmental campaigning occupied much of the rest of his life. With Milo Dunphy and several others he established the Total Environment Centre in 1972, with Dunphy at its head. In 1989 he produced with Helen Dufty the educational poster *Greenhouse Alert!* aimed at young people, a copy of which was sent by the Federal government to every school in Australia. Increasingly the Sutherland Shire became the focus of his activities, as the world came to the Shire – international oil and logistical interests, desalinators, sandminers, all intent on developments in Botany Bay that threatened fragile ecologies, plans to store nuclear waste at Lucas Heights, a proposed 'mega tip', an airport expansion at Towra Point.....Walshe threw himself into campaigning, organising meetings, drafting motions, lobbying politicians and local councillors, leading protests, addressing rallies, writing articles and letters for the local press, producing newsletters....in 1991 he was the foundation chair of the Sutherland Shire Environment Centre. In 2006, aged 83, he was active patron of two environmental centres, and convenor of eleven community organisations. When he was awarded an Order of

Australia in 1998 for 'services to education and the environment', he regarded it as a campaign asset, tacking it to his name in all his future campaigning.

Walshe believed you could tackle global problems by addressing their manifestations at the local level where there were chances of actually winning. The act of engaging with issues, of organising and campaigning, could empower people. Moreover, a win for a cause at the local level could spur activists to go further, giving them confidence and abilities to address other, bigger, issues beyond the local. And when there were losses, and there were, these need not lead to despondency if you had created a genuine sense of cooperation and community within the campaign organisation, something Walshe was a skilled in helping create.

The sort of campaigning Walshe encouraged and helped develop was always articulate, backed by thorough research, resourced, and highly visible, thus becoming inspirational and educational to others not directly involved, well beyond the local area. Associated with Walshe for close to three decades, activist Phillip Smith recalls Walshe as being able to draw people together, and as being "calm and determined and excited and controlled and strategic and supportive, all at the same time."

#### **THE END**

Bob died in Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (Sydney) on 6 March 2018, following a fall. By accounts, it was a peaceful end, those close to him holding his hands, another reading to him from one of his favourite poems, Banjo Paterson's 'The Man from Snowy River'. Somewhere during the last few stanzas, he ceased breathing. It was 8.15pm. There were many tributes to the man post-mortem, variously attesting to his modesty, his kindness, thoughtfulness, intelligence, mostly from people who knew him from his environmental activism. Few knew the full extent of his activism and impacts, because the thing about Bob was he was not a walking CV; his activism was not ego-driven in the modern 'selfie' sort of way. Rather he helped others to become the people they could become, and let them take the credit warranted. Writing in 2002, Alan Barcan described Bob as "a model activist", while Terry Irving and I writing in 2016 attempted to capture him and his activism by describing him as "the most famous person you do not know".

24 March 2018.