

Sir Theodor Bray (1904-2000)

Memories of Sir Theodor Bray

Patrick Buckridge

I first met Sir Theodor Bray about 25 years ago in the bar at the Johnsonian Club in Brisbane where my father had taken me for lunch, in the formal way he occasionally did. Bray would have been just over seventy at the time. The introduction and conversation were brief, but his gimlet eyes, gravelly voice and rather saturnine aspect made a memorable impression. Small and stocky, with an air of self-possessed authority, he seemed like the kind of man you wouldn't cross with impunity, and I have no doubt that several generations of *Courier-Mail* staff journalists found that to be true. The Johnsonian is an appropriate setting in which to think of him, because he had, at least in his latter years, something of the bearish conviviality and aggressive opinions that we associate with the great Doctor himself; and also because he placed himself, as Johnson did, close to the intersection of daily journalism, the learned professions and academic scholarship. He was comfortable in all three of those worlds, as his long career was to demonstrate.

Bray was born in 1904 in Adelaide and spent the first twenty-five years of his life there, starting out his career as a journalist on the now defunct Adelaide *Register*. In 1929 he moved to Melbourne, where he worked for seven years on the Melbourne *Argus*. When it folded in 1936 he was part of a large diaspora of highly qualified journalists who left Melbourne to look for work elsewhere. Most of them, like Syd Deamer and Cyril Pearl, ended up in Sydney, working for Frank Packer's revamped *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*, but Ted Bray came to Brisbane to work on the *Courier-Mail*. In 1943 he took over as Editor, and steered the paper through the nationwide journalists' strike of 1943, and then the great Censorship Crisis of 1944, when Commonwealth Police in Sydney seized an issue of the *Telegraph* at gunpoint in an attempt to stifle editorial criticism of the Government's wartime censorship practices. In Brisbane a ban on reporting the incident was imposed by the Government and defied by Bray, who called the censor's bluff and published reports of it in the *Courier-Mail*.

These events are on the public record, but I elicited Bray's version of them from him in an interview in 1986, when I was starting my research for a biography of Brian Penton, the wartime editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and leader of the press attack on the censorship restrictions, a man Bray had known well prior to his early demise. By this time I was working at Griffith University, of which Bray was the founding Chancellor. His enthusiasm, energy and intelligence in that role were legendary: he and the late John Willett, the founding Vice-Chancellor, made a formidable team. From the early 1970s, when Griffith was in its planning stages, they shared a vision for an alternative kind of university, one that catered for a broader, more socially diverse student intake with a curriculum that was problem-based and interdisciplinary even in traditional science and humanities areas, and which extended those principles to new areas of undergraduate education such as Asian studies and environmental studies. Bray's enthusiasm came from his long-held 'Chifleyite Labor' sympathies (as he described them) and belief in the value of a public and widely accessible system of university education. It also came from his years as a journalist during which he saw the need to connect the academy with the public sphere in new, more productive and flexible ways. He and Willett were ahead of their time in the Australian university context (Flinders was a forerunner), and the institution they created maintained its innovative, alternative character for considerably longer than the few comparable Australian universities, thanks in large part to the tenacity with which Bray held to that original vision while he was Chancellor.

It was in his dual capacities as former Chancellor (he retired in 1984) and wartime newspaper editor that I had my most extended dealings with Ted Bray. In July 1995 the Queensland Studies Centre held its annual conference at James Cook University in Townsville. Our theme was 'War's End' and the program comprised a mix of papers, panels and reminiscences from historians, literary critics, journalists, novelists, schoolkids, and ordinary people with stories to tell about their experiences of the War in Queensland. We thought we'd ask Ted Bray to attend: as a real wartime editor he was just the kind of person we wanted, but he was 91, and I didn't hold out much hope he'd do it. As it turned out, he not only came for the full conference (at his own expense), but he performed on two panels with the coherence, clarity and wit of a man twenty or thirty years his junior; he attended every session and contributed to most of them; and he was a tower of strength for one of our other eminent guests, the late Michael Noonan, who was having some trouble getting about but was able to do so with Ted's assistance to and from their motel. There were some extraordinary moments at that conference. One was seeing Ted Bray and Billy Wentworth, the old maverick Liberal Minister, Menzies' *bête noire*, who occupied the stage with Ted for nearly an hour, building on one another's unique and vivid memories of the War years, occasionally disagreeing – on the reality of the Brisbane Line, for example – but generally giving the audience a richly detailed sense of what it was like to be in public life in those years.

A slightly unpleasant incident from that conference showed the steely side of the man. One delegate, an academic, having imbibed fairly freely in the early part of the conference dinner, took it upon himself to heckle the after-dinner speaker,

Michael Noonan. In the bus back to the college, the heckler made conversational overtures to Ted, who began by ignoring him, but when he persisted turned to him and said, in a thunderous voice, 'No sir, I will *not* speak with you!' Needless to say, that was the end of the matter.

One other moment showed that same immense self-possession in a different vein. The occasion was a farewell dinner in University House at Nathan campus, held in honour of Bob Ross, the founding Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching, and as such one of the architects, with Bray and Willett, of the early Griffith. One of the speakers that night was Bob's father Edgar Ross, then 92 years of age, a Communist and former Secretary of the New South Wales branch of the Australian Mine Workers Union in the late 1940s, and a chief instigator of the great Coal Strike that helped to bring down the Chifley government in the 1949 federal election. He spoke, as he still does from time to time, with the controlled eloquence and rational passion that a lifetime in the Party, sharpened by time spent in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, had produced. It was impressive in its own right, but it was given an extra dimension by being followed by the speech of the 93-year old Ted Bray, as skilled and articulate in its way as Edgar's was, but the product of a quite different historical tradition, that of the liberal professional man, superficially more local in its perspectives, but as intense in its reforming values as the revolutionary tradition itself. For somebody like myself, with a fascination for the 'feel' of the '30s and '40s in Australia – the textures of the voices, the cadences and formulas of the public discourse – it was a privilege to be present at what seemed almost like a ceremonial exhibition and final reconciliation of the ideological battles of that turbulent period. It also said something about the blend of left radicalism and liberal reformism that informed Griffith University in its first decade of teaching, and that Ted Bray, the former editor of a conservative Brisbane newspaper, had encouraged and supported throughout his tenure as Chancellor.

I didn't know Ted well. Indeed, I'm not even sure I should be calling him 'Ted' – it's not something he encouraged, I gather, and I certainly never used anything but 'Sir Theodor' to his face. And yet this non-native Queenslander came to embody several of the traditions and institutions – a newspaper, a university, a middle-class masculine gentility – that born-and-bred Queenslanders like myself, for better or worse, feel very comfortable with. For all sorts of reasons we certainly won't be seeing his like again.