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GERRY WALSH 1934-2014

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Gerry Walsh: Academic faced Duntroon's dark side

Gerry Walsh will be remembered mostly for the notorious "bastardisation" scandal at the Royal Military College, Duntroon in 1969.

He had joined the University of NSW's faculty of military studies at Duntroon in 1966. The war in Vietnam was on and protest growing. Walsh was a 1950s national serviceman and he initially supported the war. Later, after studying Asia for his groundbreaking "revolts and counter-insurgency" course, he changed.



Blunt: Gerry Walsh was a plain speaker when roused, in 1983. *Photo: David Bartho*

Meanwhile, however, disturbed by cadet behaviour in class at Duntroon, where academic demands had increased with the introduction of degrees, Walsh gathered information before writing to the commandant. An earlier Duntroon graduate, Geoffrey Solomon, later wrote that the letter's tone "was not inflammatory but the contents highly combustible".

A colleague leaked the letter to the press - national, even international publicity and an official inquiry followed. Walsh, who did not have tenure, was blamed. One cadet threatened him. The army tried to have him sacked. Most colleagues and his union ran for cover but his professor, formidable former South African colonel Leonard (L.C.F.) Turner, backed him. He survived but knew his advancement prospects were crippled.



Gerry Walsh. *Photo: Harriet Veitch*

Later, a senior officer told cadets Walsh was "a well-known communist and there are 20 card-carrying Marxists in the academic departments". Unperturbed, Walsh scoffed, "there's not even 20 card-carrying members of the Labor Party." The slurs would have been offensive if not so laughable.

Indeed, Walsh was an unofficial speechwriter and policy adviser to Labor parliamentarian Ken Fry, instigating the speech that led to increased funding for the Australian War Memorial. Later, he became disillusioned with Labor.

The best insight into Walsh's stand is provided by his subsequent sympathetic biography of NSW's flawed democratic warrior, "brilliant" Daniel Deniehy, also an Irish Catholic, who branded and fought the "bunyip aristocracy".

Walsh was prominent again in 1983 when "bastardisation" at the Australian Defence Force Academy featured, but after retirement he refused to comment on the ADFA-Skype scandal. He said "it's someone else's turn". Yet he always "went into bat" for individual cadets he thought wronged.

Among Walsh's achievements as an historian to date - a manuscript on the Murrumbidgee River awaits publication - his contribution to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, this country's greatest social science project, is unequalled. Walsh fought successfully against the University of Sydney history professor John Ward's opposition to including one of Thomas

Keneally's subjects, the Aboriginal "Jimmy" Governor, in the *ADB*. The Australian National University awarded him the dictionary's medal in 2002 after his 50 years of involvement.

Emeritus Professor John Molony said in his eulogy for Walsh that this "Bradman" of the *ADB* "retired 198 not out". At his death, Walsh was researching subject number 199, Coral Lansbury, the remarkable mother of Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Gerald Patrick Walsh was born in Marrickville in 1934, to Terence Walsh, a post office telegraphist and, later, his union's anti-communist general secretary. The Walshs had migrated from Ireland for the 1850s gold rush, settling as small farmers near Braidwood. The nine children dispersed to NSW's south and north coasts, especially around Ballina. Gerry's tailor grandfather returned to Braidwood, via Coonamble, where Terence was born. Terence's wife, and Gerry's mother, was Kathleen Jenkins, a typist, who came from an Irish selector family at Wallabadah, near Quirindi.

Gerry attended Sydney Catholic schools, notably St Patrick's College, Strathfield, where one schoolmate was the novelist Keneally, with whom he remained in contact. He admired Keneally's works though understandably was gently critical of his history efforts: "If you believed Tom," he said lightly, "the Irish did everything in Australia."

Walsh was never sentimental about his forebears' land or religion. He exhibited no anti-Englishness. On sabbatical in London he took visiting Duntroon graduates to the British Library, the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich observatory and even Karl Marx's grave at Highgate. He treated them to dinners at the Cafe Royal in Piccadilly, "I know, I paid for it," he later recalled. He deeply admired all British contributions, including in arts, law and above all, technology, to "civilisation", in all its expressions.

His free weekends were spent watching sport or listening to classical music while reading history or memoirs. He treasured his *Grove's Dictionary of Music*.

Walsh trod the upward path of many working class Australians by achieving university qualifications through Commonwealth and teachers' scholarships. He taught between 1957 and 1960 in Sydney's western suburbs high schools, and was chuffed recently, when some unknown 60-year-olds expressed their thanks.

His master's thesis at the University of Sydney on the industrial revolution in Sydney kindled a love of technology and science. Many of his *ADB* entries were on those who contributed to Australia's business and scientific development, with perhaps his favourite being Martin Selley, of handyman-product fame. A passionate beer drinker - NSW brews only - Walsh wrote the entries for Resch, Tooth, Toohey and James Squire, whose famous signature he discovered.

Walsh could link individual biographies into a wider fabric. He observed that the Beer Excise Act (1901) led, before today's re-emergence of micro-brewing, to the centralisation of brewing more effectively than Federation led to unification of state railway gauges.

The technology of agriculture and pastoralism engaged him most. His study of geography - he treasured maps - gave him an appreciation of the land in historical developments. In 1961, an ANU doctoral scholarship in historical geography led to research for Sir Keith Hancock's

book, *Discovering Monaro*. Walsh would later casually say, without resentment, "I wrote a lot of that."

Later, he revisited this field in three wonderfully accessible books on rural settlement. Traditionally weak on the "sheilas", he was proud of his belated work on female pioneers. His favourites, though, were technologies - the fence-wire strainer, the windmill and, above all, the sheepdog.

Walsh entered the keen amateur-genealogical debate on the origins of the famed kelpie with unusual trepidation, fearing sheep graziers, not historians. Proud that he received no criticism, he explained how he got it right, "I followed the man, not the dog."

Sport was a passion, especially league, union and cricket. He derided AFL (along with all things Victorian) as "the scrappy game" and ignored soccer. He wrote *ADB* articles on Wallaby Herbert Moran, bowlers Albert "Tibby" Cotter and Ernie Jones, as well as all-round champion Harold Hardwick. Never one-eyed, he said of bodyline "if we had had [bowler Harold] Larwood, we'd have done the same".

A leading 1970s-80s figure in ACT junior cricket, Walsh umpired while organising weekend games for more than 300 teams, junior national titles and Australian Cricket Board "Youth Tests". He helped a young Michael Bevan and said of teenage sensation Craig McDermott, "Gee, he's quick".

At ANU he reprised then future prime minister Bob Hawke's expulsion from University House, refusing to apologise for a loud party, sharing a tent with mates by Lake George. He fell out with his supervisor and took a second masters instead of a doctorate.

When moved to battle, Walsh spoke unaffectedly in a language regrettably now almost unrecognisable in our globalised-electronic Australia. Someone was "not worth two knobs of goat shit", another was "fruit for the sideboard" and one real piece of work was dismissed as "a c---, a ratshit c---; and that's praising him up".

His Fabian advice to allies was equally succinct, "Do nothing but do it very well." If you did, you might receive his greatest accolade, "I told you what to do and you did it."

Gerry Walsh is survived by his brothers Brian and Michael.

Greg Pemberton

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