

The ‘People’s Registry’ and the Long Afterlife of Student Radicalism

NICHOLAS HERRIOT

Nicholas Herriot is a PhD candidate at the University of Adelaide with an interest in oral history, social movements and Australian student radicalism during the ‘long 1960s’.

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The four-week student occupation of the Flinders University Registry in August 1974 was a climactic confrontation between student activists and the university administration. The mid- to late 1970s are often understood as a time of disillusionment and decline for Australian student radicalism. This article draws upon the oral testimony of 11 former Flinders student activists and casts doubt on this narrative of straightforward defeat by tracing the complex evolution of radical subjectivities after 1974. In the case of Flinders University, tracing both the immediate aftermath and longer-term afterlives of the 1974 sit-in challenges a problematic characterisation of the People’s Registry as a ‘last hurrah’ of student activism. Although activists faced new challenges within the university and wider society, many directed their activities towards new issues and concerns such as women’s liberation. Oral history interviews are used to highlight the ways political activism had a lifelong impact on the personal lives of those who experienced it. Oral testimony is therefore positioned as a significant source for understanding the longer-term evolution of activist identities forged on the campuses.

INTRODUCTION

On 1 August 1974, over 100 students launched a four-week sit-in of the Flinders University administration building. Adelaide’s *Advertiser* painted a sensational portrait of the occupied Registry: ‘Students had erected a barricade across the entrance road in readiness to repel any unwelcome visitors, particularly the police. Perched like a keep on the top of the hill, [the Registry] was bedecked with defiant banners and slogans...“People’s Occupation. Fight Oppression”, “No Cops on

Campus” and “Kick the Bosses, Coppers Out”.¹ Historian Graham Hastings claims that some militants ‘got a bit carried away by the drama...and decided to bring guns along to the occupation, ready for a Eureka Stockade–style fight to the death’.² In Maoist parlance, the building had become a ‘People’s Registry’. ‘Come and use it’, the students wrote. ‘Show that a university’s resources are for the people and not the bureaucrats and their bosses!’³

Flinders opened in 1966 as South Australia’s second university and quickly became a cauldron of radical ideas. The experimental and youthful culture of this new institution was a magnet for less traditional students who were receptive to radical political and cultural worldviews. In the years prior to the occupation, Flinders’ student activists, and their academic allies, had earned nationwide reputations for radicalism and ‘trouble making’. Radicals voiced their dissent through publications such as controversial student newspaper *Empire Times* and took to the streets in protest, among many other issues, against the Vietnam War and apartheid in South Africa, which the Australian government was accused of endorsing by allowing that nation’s rugby team to tour Australia in 1971. In doing so, students hoped to challenge injustices on both a global and local scale.

The occupation of the Registry was a climactic confrontation between student activists and the university administration. The immediate trigger for the People’s Registry was a dispute in the history discipline between students and staff regarding compulsory examinations. But this issue masked the students’ deeper concerns about the university being autocratic and in the service of capitalism and American imperialism. As they sought to democratise Flinders University, the student activists developed a critique of their institution that mirrored their critique of society more broadly.⁴

1 ‘They’re the Kings of the Castle’, *Advertiser*, 13 August 1974, 1.

2 Graham Hastings, *It Can’t Happen Here: A Political History of Australian Student Activism* (Adelaide: Flinders University Students Association, 2003), 97.

3 ‘The People’s Registry’, student leaflet, 1974, Protest Movements Collection/046, Flinders University Library (henceforth FUL).

4 For elaboration, see Nicholas Herriot and Paul Sendziuk, “‘The Best Way to Help Vietnam is to Make Revolution in your own Country’: Student Radicalism at Flinders University in the Long 1960s”, *Labour History* 124, no. 1 (2023): 163–189.

Adelaide's daily papers offered sensational coverage of the People's Registry before rapidly losing interest in the activities of student activists. 'News of the liberation of the Flinders University Registry building yesterday after more than three weeks of occupation by dissident students provokes a reaction of relief', the *Advertiser* editorialised on 29 August 1974.⁵ As the press sighed with relief, as staff returned to their offices and as cleaners began removing student graffiti, some commentators were tempted to believe that the curtain had closed on this 'lawless performance'. 'Rebel students', wrote journalist Stewart Cockburn, had 'demonstrably lost their principal tactical battle with the administration'.⁶ In his history of Flinders University, David Hilliard claims that after the occupation, 'students lost interest in political activity' and 'for the next few years there was a mood of apathy on the campus'.⁷ Hastings concluded that the 1974 Flinders occupation proved to be a 'last "hurrah" for the generation radicalised by Vietnam'.⁸ And, indeed, the mid- to late 1970s are generally understood as a time of decline for Australian student radicalism.⁹ This article considers if the activists did indeed realise that the moment for making revolution had passed. Did they cut their hair, stop printing radical literature on the Gestetner and join the mainstream? Drawing upon the testimony of 11 former student radicals who either participated in the Registry occupation or attended Flinders University around that time, as well as the written testimony of others, I cast doubt on a narrative of straightforward defeat by tracing the complex evolution of radical subjectivities after 1974.

5 'The Flinders Farce', *Advertiser*, 29 August 1974, 5.

6 'Professor Keeps Faith in Young', *Advertiser*, 30 August 1974, 5.

7 David Hilliard, *Flinders University: The First 25 Years, 1966–1991* (Adelaide: Flinders University, 1991), 68.

8 Hastings, *It Can't Happen Here*, 76.

9 See, for example, Alan Barcan, *From New Left to Factional Left: Fifty Years of Student Activism at Sydney University* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011), 125–155; Mick Armstrong, 1, 2, 3, *What Are We Fighting For? The Australian Student Movement from its Origins to the 1970s* (Melbourne: Socialist Alternative, 2001), 95–111; Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett, *Seizures of Youth: 'The Sixties' and Australia* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1991), 164. For a contrasting account that disrupts the conventional 'rise and fall' narrative of activism and dismissal of student radicalism since the 1960s, see Tim Briedis, "Education for Liberation not for World Domination": Student Protest in Australia, 1985–2006', (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2018).

LOTTERY
 *TODAY'S DRAW P. 18

THE NEWS

Phone (Editorial and other business) 22 0221
Classified 22 0182

Adelaide: Thursday, August 29, 1974 7c*

LAST

WEATHER A shower or two. TEMP. (at 1 p.m.) 15.0 C. Sunset 5.55.

CAMPUS BATTLE



ABOVE: Covering their faces, students are escorted from the university by police this morning. BELOW: Senior Constable John Keough and Sulu (left), with Sgt. Lloyd Morley and Kaffir at the university.

Rocks hurled as 70 police called to Uni.

By Peter Murphy

A night battle for Flinders University's administration block ended early today when 70 police drove on to the campus.

Police were called about 1.30 a.m. by university staff members who said they were being attacked in the administration building by about 70 students.

The staff members said students squirted them with fire extinguishers, threw rocks, and attempted to force the barricaded front door with a wooden plank.

About a dozen staff men and 20 security guards retreated to the first floor and then called police as the students tried to retake the building.

One security man received head injuries from a brick hurled at the building.

As the police task force, which included detectives and two police dogs, led by the Assistant Commissioner of Operations, Mr. E. L. Calder, approached the campus, the door of the main generator room was forced and the power supply was cut off.

The convoy of police cars drove up university road and ambulances bombarded them with bricks and rocks out of the darkness.

Besieged

Mr. Calder said three police cars were damaged before the convoy reached the administration block.

The students (and others) gathered outside the besieged administration building block as police approached.

A student said: "We were standing there awaiting the cars. When we reached them we decided it was time to take off."

The attackers scattered into the university grounds. About 12 students took refuge in the university union building.

About two weeks ago, the University Union announced that the building would be a sanctuary for students if police were called in to settle the sit-in dispute.

Police gathered outside the union building while other police and the two tracker dogs, Sulu and Kaffir, searched the grounds for those who fled after the attack on the administration block.

Secretary of the University Union, Mr. Ian Yates, carried messages from police to the students in the union building.

• Cont. Page 7

PM keeps out

CAMERON ROWS WITH PILOTS

CANBERRA, Today: The Prime Minister, Mr. Whitlam, will not take any action to persuade the Labor Minister, Mr. Cameron, from intervening in the pilots' pay claim.

It is understood Mr. Whitlam, who is holidaying in north Queensland, considers the matter urgent up to Mr. Cameron.

When the pilots' case came on in Sydney today, the ACTU announced it would intervene.

Mr. Cameron has clashed with the ACTU president, Mr. Hawke, who accused Mr. Cameron of breaching ALP policy in intervening in pay negotiations between Qantas and the Australian Federation of Air Pilots.

• Cont. Page 3



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Figure 1 The News reports on clashes between students, staff and police at the conclusion of the Registry occupation, 29 August 1974. Photograph supplied by Nicholas Herriot.

The creation of first-hand accounts of student radicalism was an integral part of this research.¹⁰ Although the story of Flinders radicals exists within local folklore in Adelaide, this is the first attempt to record the narratives of Flinders student activists through oral history. The 11 interviewees recruited for this project – seven men and four women – were active participants in the student movement at Flinders between 1969 and at least 1974. They were reached both through an open call in the Flinders University alumni newsletter and snowballing contacts from the initial recruits, two of whom were known to a fellow researcher and introduced to me. While the sample is limited and many prominent activists are either deceased or untraceable, the participants hail from diverse backgrounds and hold multivocal memories. They represent a cross-section of the radical political perspectives dominant among students at the time: Maoism, Trotskyism, Communism and others who 'disagreed with all of the -isms'.¹¹

Oral history interviews allow historical actors to narrate subjective experiences in their own words, and thus are valuable sources for understanding the convictions of activists and what motivated them to act. Alessandro Portelli suggests that oral histories 'tell us less about events as such than about their meaning', and in a similar vein I am not concerned with the objective reconstruction of historical events themselves as much as mapping the personal experiences of participants within those events, asking how they constructed their own radical subjectivities.¹² In doing so, following Reynolds, Robinson and Sendziuk, I accept that the recall of past events inevitably involves a process of editing in which particular details are selected and others suppressed, often according to one's gender, class, contemporary political outlook or other factors, including the influence of 'collective memory'.¹³ First-hand

10 The oral history project received ethics approval from both the University of Adelaide (H-2021-072) and the State Library of South Australia, where most of the interview recordings have been deposited with the intention of assisting future scholars.

11 Andrew McHugh, interviewed by author, Adelaide, 6 September 2021, tape and transcript held by author. See Appendix 1 for details regarding interviewees' gender, enrolled course and political affiliation, if any.

12 Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop Journal* 12, no. 1 (1981): 99.

13 Robert Reynolds, Shirleene Robinson and Paul Sendziuk, *In the Eye of the Storm: Volunteers and Australia's Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2021), 14. Also see Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 'Interpreting Memories', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 297–310.

documentary sources such as memoirs, diaries and letters are, of course, similarly affected. In an attempt to mitigate these factors and strengthen the veracity of oral accounts, each interviewee's testimony has been corroborated with the testimony of others and with reference to student and staff publications, political ephemera and other parts of the surviving documentary record.

The oral history interview is an encounter in which the subjectivities of interviewer and interviewee are shaped by their 'collision'.¹⁴ I often met interviewees in their homes; small talk around the kitchen table or on the sofa quickly established my identity as a young and politically active student, and therefore a sympathetic researcher.¹⁵ Although these interactions undoubtedly influenced the ways in which former Flinders students spoke about themselves, I believe that my 'insider' status helped build trust and make interviewees more receptive to sharing their memories. Despite the age gap, we shared an identity around political activism, and narrators expected me to take their worldviews seriously. This intersubjectivity enabled me to establish a significant degree of rapport and, as a result, elicit detailed and highly textured interview responses.

Assuming mutual understanding can cause omissions, and while I may have shared common assumptions with many interviewees, I was cautious to maintain my distance as a researcher by avoiding leading or close-ended questions. Open-ended questions have the benefit of eliciting more personal and emotional responses.¹⁶ Because I am too young to have been involved in the Sixties student movement, I was able to cast a more detached eye on memories of that period. This distinguished me from many historians of student activism who are former radicals and write from an autobiographical standpoint. I self-reflexively considered my status as an activist and how that was both perceived by interviewees and influenced the following analysis. To further negotiate issues of intersubjectivity, this article draws

14 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 58.

15 Valerie Yow, "'Do I Like Them Too Much?': Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa", *Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (1997): 55.

16 Portia Dilena, "'Listening Against the Grain': Methodologies in Uncovering Emotions in Oral History Interviews", *Oral History Australia Journal* 41 (2019): 45.

upon a diverse and representational selection of narrators and brings archival sources into dialogue with oral testimony as tools for further contextualisation, comparison, contrast and interpretation.

The editors of a recent study of post-war Australian radicalism suggest that historians have only recently begun the process of 'piecing together' the long-term impact of left-wing activism on Australian society.¹⁷ An important starting point for the project of mapping activism is the individual lives and trajectories of radicals themselves. This paper expands the literature on Australian student radicalism by shedding new light on the enduring impact of activism on radicals in the comparatively under-examined South Australian context.¹⁸ It offers insight into the history of the student movement at Flinders University and the lives and identities of some of its participants during, and beyond, the 'long 1960s'. Although there is a growing body of literature exploring student activism in Australia during this period, we know little about the subsequent lives of student activists in comparison to what is known about their actions on campus. Relatively few studies have foregrounded oral history. This is a major historiographical weakness because, as the interviews conducted for this article reveal, the experience of student activism remained with individuals for the rest of their lives. Studies of 1960s radical activists in Europe have employed oral testimony not only as evidence but in order to consider the shape and meanings of narratives produced retrospectively. Celia Hughes, for example, has highlighted the ways in which activist subjectivities are formed and negotiated through life stories and recollections of 1960s radicalism.¹⁹ Following Hughes, this article positions oral history as particularly suited to illuminating the longer-term impact of radicalisation on the lives of student activists.

17 Jon Piccini, Evan Smith and Matthew Worley (eds), 'Introduction', in *The Far Left in Australia Since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 14.

18 Most studies of Australian student radicalism have concentrated on events in Australia's largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne. Hastings' *It Can't Happen Here*, provides a detailed chronological overview of the Australian student movement that draws extensively on South Australian events, but his analysis does not draw extensively on oral testimony nor detail the longer afterlives of participation in the student movement on individual activists.

19 Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

The former student activists' accounts of their activities following the People's Registry leads to the conclusion that it did not signal the end of radicalism. Although the university campus did become inhospitable to political activism, radicalism spread into the wider community. 'Radicalism hadn't exhausted itself', recalled student protester Jeff Richards, 'It had begun to transform itself'.²⁰ Speaking with former activists clearly conveyed that their experiences of radical politics had enduring 'afterlives'.²¹ The mainstream press, and historians alike, missed a fascinating story not just about the conflicts that followed the occupation, but the longer-term evolution of political identities forged on the campuses.

THE 'LAST HURRAH'?

Activism at Flinders in the aftermath of the occupation problematises a narrative of straightforward defeat for student radicals following their ejection from the People's Registry at the end of August 1974. In contrast to the mainstream press's portrait of failure, Flinders student leader Dave Macpherson described 'a very sudden realisation amongst ex-occupants and non-occupants alike that the struggle was not over, it had merely entered a new phase'.²² Macpherson's realisation was supported when 1,000 students gathered for a general university meeting on 2 September 1974. Reaffirming their opposition to compulsory examinations, the overwhelming majority in attendance voted to endorse the aims of the People's Registry.²³ Both the record attendance at this meeting and its outcome suggests that radicals had garnered significant sympathy among students on campus following the occupation. Citing information leaked to the Australian Union of Students, some activists even claimed that the Australian Universities Commission 'feared a nationwide student uprising' inspired by the troubles at Flinders.²⁴ While such a rebellion never eventuated, Flinders vice-chancellor Roger Russell was regularly harangued by student

20 Jeff Richards, interviewed by author, Adelaide, 10 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

21 Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

22 Booklet on the Flinders Occupation prepared by Dave Macpherson for the Annual Council of the Australian Union of Students, 1975, FUA/Student Politics/Occupation of the Registry/2, FUL.

23 'Troubles at Flinders', *Advertiser*, 3 September 1974.

24 Booklet on the Occupation, FUL.

activists at speeches across the country.²⁵ According to Hilliard, student criticism of the vice-chancellor's research (discovered during the occupation to have been partly funded by the American military) meant that Russell became 'less visible on the campus' until his retirement in 1979.²⁶

Support for students facing disciplinary charges provided another anchor to activists who wanted to continue to resist the university administration after 1974. Several activists were suspended or expelled for incidents of alleged staff harassment following the occupation. Consistent with their emphasis on participatory democracy, radicals rejected the closed-door Board of Discipline investigations and instead demanded that all charges be heard at mass university assemblies.²⁷ One expelled Worker-Student Alliance activist, Michael Clark, continued to occupy his university-owned home until 1977, long after he had been ordered to vacate.²⁸ As former student Andrew McHugh explained, 'the notion of fairness and justice' continued to motivate activists after 1974 because, in his view, 'of all the punitive measures that the university used to try and bring a few ringleaders to bear'.²⁹

A SHIFTING TERRAIN

In mapping the afterlives of activism, it is first necessary to acknowledge the ways in which a changing political terrain did create new challenges for radicals within the university. This section introduces the evolution of student radicalism at Flinders after 1974, during what can be characterised as a transition period from the heady weeks of the People's Registry to a new context in which activists navigated unfamiliar challenges, rethought their tactics and, in some cases, even realigned their ideological positions. Although the campaign against discipline at Flinders enabled students to challenge the vice-chancellor after 1974, it simultaneously signalled the increasingly defensive character of campus-based activism. In hindsight, Mark Rohde reflected,

25 Hastings, *It Can't Happen Here*, 118.

26 Hilliard, *Flinders University*, 89.

27 'Discipline News', student publication, 1975, FUA/Student Politics/Student Protests at Flinders University 1975/2, FUL.

28 'Student Loses Home and Uni Rights', *Advertiser*, 12 November 1976, 8.

29 Andrew McHugh, 6 September 2021.

dealing with a series of court cases involving students who had participated in the occupation, particularly those implicated in skirmishes with staff, consumed activists’

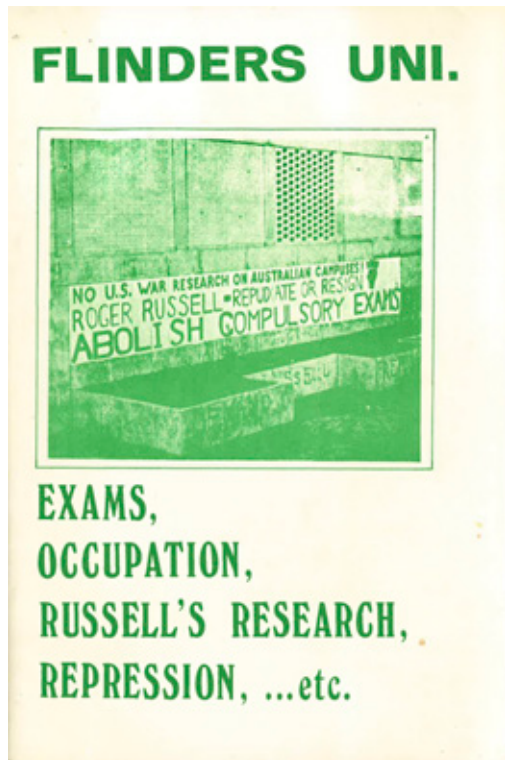


Figure 2 Front page of a booklet on the Flinders Occupation prepared for the Australian Union of Students, January 1975. Photograph supplied by Nicholas Herriot.

time and meant that ‘we weren’t able to focus on other things’.³⁰ By the mid-1970s, broader developments both within the university and wider society meant that, in some ways, the ground was beginning to shift beneath the feet of student radicals.

The most severely wounded victim of a changing political situation was Maoism, a way of viewing the world and the nature of revolution that was particularly prevalent among student activists at Flinders. Maoist students at Flinders were inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China, particularly what they perceived as the struggle of students and youth in Chairman Mao’s

struggle against bureaucracy. The Flinders Worker-Student Alliance gave organisational expression to Maoist ideas in a local context and emphasised the three key principles of ‘opposition to US imperialism, fighting fascism in Australia, and opposition to capitalism’.³¹ ‘I still have a memory in my head of probably early 1976, going through the campus and wondering, what the hell, the Maoists have fucking disappeared’, Jeff Richards, a member of Socialist Youth Alliance (SYA), a rival Trotskyist group, recalled.³² Although it is inconceivable that students vanished into

30 Mark Rohde, interviewed by author, Adelaide, 6 September 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

31 ‘The Truth about WSA and the Correct Line(s)’, *Empire Times*, 27 April 1972. For further discussion of the meaning of Maoist ideas at Flinders University, see Herriot and Sendziuk, “‘The Best Way to Help Vietnam’”, 174–177.

32 The Socialist Youth Alliance (SYA) was a Trotskyist group affiliated with the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, led by Ernest Mandel. Notably, the SYA were staunch opponents of what they saw as ‘Stalinist’ regimes and, according to Jeff Richards, ‘This set us apart from the hardcore Maoists and

thin air, as Jeff suggested, it is the case that Maoism largely exhausted its energies by the late 1970s. For Mark Rohde, student activism during 1974 had initially clarified his political beliefs: 'Instead of being on the edges of [Maoist] groups, I became involved fully in them. At that point I saw myself as becoming engaged with a broader Marxist–Leninist form of politics'. Mark's increasing 'disillusionment' with Maoism, however, had its roots in the very attempt to make revolution in Australian society. The Maoist agenda of Australian independence from foreign domination led to increasing political frustration during the later 1970s. 'It made sense to talk about Australia being independent of the US as a starting point for people's radicalism', Mark reflected. But 'a lot of people just seemed to be stuck there'.³³ In Mark's view, a spuriously progressive Australian nationalism came to overshadow the importance of socialist revolution. Pragmatic evolutions in Chinese foreign policy only reinforced a sense of confusion among Australian radicals.³⁴ 'We were very strong on supporting the Vietnamese revolution', Jeff Richards remembered. 'So, to see China making a deal with Nixon while Cambodia was being bombed...I think it put a lot of questions in the heads of many radicals'.³⁵

When asked about their experiences after 1974, activists often described fundamental changes to the social landscape that had inhibited or enabled them to discover their identities as radicals. Ian Yates evoked the metaphor of a wave to describe his 'sense that you were with a big tide of people, but then the issues became more complex and less overwhelming'.³⁶ For others, the dismissal of prime minister Gough Whitlam in 1975 functioned as a convenient marker for significant social changes and, in some ways, the onset of an increasingly conservative political 'mood'.³⁷ 'We

supporters of the Soviet Union within traditional communist parties'. At Flinders, Trotskyists such as Jeff 'felt it was our role to challenge the myths surrounding Cultural Revolution Maoism and the Maoists' ultra-left stances'. Jeff Richards, personal correspondence with the author, 20 May 2023.

33 Mark Rohde, 6 September 2021.

34 Xiaoxiao Xie, 'The Rise and Fall of Australian Maoism' (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 2016), 201.

35 Jeff Richards, 10 August 2021.

36 Ian Yates, interviewed by author, Middleton, 14 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

37 Jeff Richards, 10 August 2021; Anni Browning, interviewed by author, online, 12 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author; Steve O'Brien, interviewed by author, online, 20 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

had the Whitlam era and free education', Bob Ellis reflected. 'When that changed, so did the student body's perceptions. They had to keep their nose to the grindstone. They didn't have time to participate in broader activities'.³⁸ Andrew McHugh, who remained employed as the printer of the Flinders' student newspaper *Empire Times* for several decades after 1974, echoed Bob's observations: 'As people ended up creating more debt or needing to pay more for education, they suddenly had to start working part-time. And then I think people started seeing their fellow students in a less egalitarian way'.³⁹

The transformation of universities themselves created an increasingly unfavourable environment for activists. Indeed, the trajectory of courses with their origins in the political ferment of the early 1970s illustrated the challenges of sustaining radicalism within the academy. As Flinders faced new financial difficulties, Women's Studies, which had been a nurturing hub for student activists, suffered job losses and marginalisation.⁴⁰ From the perspective of student activists, the cuts to Women's Studies stemmed from its fundamentally 'threatening and "unacademic" intentions'.⁴¹ The threat of complete closure was only prevented after a successful public campaign in 1983.⁴² At the end of his career, radical professor of philosophy Brian Medlin reflected on how difficult it had become for a socialist to work within the academy. Experimental courses, Medlin lamented, 'became harder to teach' and group assessment was replaced with a 'top down' teaching style.⁴³ By 1978, the Flinders University Socialist Youth Alliance painted a gloomy portrait of student radicalism:

This university is bedevilled with the politics of mediocrity and compromise
– among student politicians, among bureaucrats and among lecturers and

38 Bob and Julie Ellis, interviewed by author, Wistow, 9 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

39 Andrew McHugh, 6 September 2021.

40 Women's Studies Collective, *A History of Women's Studies at Flinders University* (Adelaide: Empire Times Press, 1987).

41 Prue Anderson, 'Women's Studies Conference', *National U*, 26 July 1975, 6.

42 Susan Sheridan, "'Transcending Tauromachy": The Beginnings of Women's Studies in Adelaide', *Australian Feminist Studies* 13, no. 27 (1998): 72.

43 Brian Medlin, Submission to the Committee for the Review of the Discipline of Philosophy, 1991, Medlin Collection, Box 1, Folder 21, Brian Medlin Collection, FUL.

tutors. Backroom deals, secrecy, dismissal of Student Consultative Committees – all this is not the mark of a vital and enlightened institution, but one that is in a slow process of decay.⁴⁴

Although hyperbolic, this rhetoric marked a dramatic shift from the earlier political optimism of publications such as *Empire Times*. Just four years after the occupation, the diagnosis of this editorial was grim: 'Depressions and distinctions will become the motto from our Alma Mater'.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND MOVING INTO THE COMMUNITY

The People's Registry foregrounded new challenges and concerns for student radicals. Perhaps most importantly, the occupation was an opportunity for female activists to consider their position on the radical left. One participant, Karen, likened the sit-in to a family in which tensions and contradictions were brought to a head.⁴⁵ For Judith Wotherspoon, although the occupation was full of tremendous political excitement, she encountered 'constant problems between blokes and women'. 'All the domestic work was left to the women', she remembered. 'It's so common...but the men don't notice'.⁴⁶ Judith's memory of having her 'hands in the sink' complicates the portrait of democracy painted by some of the male student activists. Female activists protested their exclusion from leadership positions by forming a 'women's caucus' within the occupation. They alleged that men undermined female chairs during meetings and denied women the opportunity to develop their skills by writing political pamphlets. While few male interviewees recalled gendered conflict within the sit-in, women often reflected on what they saw as the masculinism of male radicals. Some male narrators did recount encounters with the emergent women's liberation movement around the time of the occupation. Jeff Richards vividly recalled his 'first moment of recognising the beginning of the feminist movement' when he was reprimanded

44 *Socialist Challenge*, weekly leaflet of the Flinders University Socialist Youth Alliance, 1978, PRG 622/9, State Library of South Australia (henceforth SLSA).

45 Karen and Bri, interviewed by Audrey Windram in Adelaide in 1975, PRG 1608/2/21, SLSA.

46 Judith Wotherspoon, interviewed by author, Adelaide, 15 September 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

by a female comrade for referring to women as ‘chicks’.⁴⁷ Mark Rohde stressed his sympathy for the ‘strong feminist influence on the campus’ and particularly activists ‘struggling against male chauvinism within the Maoist movement, which it was somewhat notorious for at times’.⁴⁸ The fraternal culture of male activists, however, generally featured more prominently in women’s accounts of student radicalism, whereas female activists tended to assume more of a background presence in men’s stories. ‘The New Left was looking pretty old in lots of ways’, former student Chris Beasley explained.⁴⁹

Written in the aftermath of the 1974 occupation, a statement by Sally Trevena and Belinda Porich suggests that female radicals at Flinders found themselves marginalised within a movement claiming to embody the ideals of participatory democracy. Their letter opened with a quote from American feminist Robin Morgan: ‘A genuine left doesn’t consider anyone’s suffering irrelevant, nor does it function as a microcosm of capitalist economy, with men competing for power and status at the top, and women doing all the work at the bottom’. Morgan’s words gave voice to the women’s own experience of the People’s Registry. ‘We are prepared to be militant, and revolutionary’, they continued, ‘but not at the dictates of sexist male revolutionaries’.⁵⁰ Sexism was a common feature of student movements worldwide during the long 1960s and often catalysed demands for women’s liberation.⁵¹ In her study of the 1968 student movement in Italy, for example, oral historian and feminist Luisa Passerini has highlighted the ways in which women’s personal and negative experiences in the New Left ‘posited the problem of women’s liberation in a more

47 Jeff Richards, 10 August 2021.

48 Mark Rohde, 6 September 2021.

49 Chris Beasley, interviewed by author, Adelaide, 26 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

50 ‘Counterfeit Left Exposed’, statement by Sally Trevena and Belinda Porich, 16 September 1974, PRG 622/7, SLSA.

51 For discussion of gender issues in student movements during the long 1960s, see Ronald Fraser, *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), 304–310; Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1979); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 153–170.

urgent mode than before'.⁵² Similarly, Celia Hughes notes the ways in which activists' experiences of protest were inflected by gender. 'Subjectivity and the bonds of comradeship', Hughes argues, 'were shaped within a shifting social and political landscape in which to be a young activist woman was replete with uncertainty'.⁵³ As women sought to emphasise issues of subjectivity and sexuality, many developed a feminist politics that moved away from the Maoism dominant at Flinders. The People's Registry had taught Trevena and Porich that they could not 'automatically view the left as our allies...our primary political allegiance is to other women'.⁵⁴ Chris Beasley felt that the Flinders Marxist–Leninists 'constructed themselves as a kind of warrior class'. She remembered her dissatisfaction with Maoism in similar terms to Trevena and Porich:

It was very much about being a tough guy for the revolution and little attention paid to how people interacted with each other...the way they actually acted as a group was often at odds with what I felt was the right way to be a socialist, or a feminist or any other kind of -ist who was trying to change the world.⁵⁵

For many politically radical young women, the occupation demonstrated the need to assert women's liberation as an autonomous political force both on and off the campus.

Trevena and Porich's polemic draws attention to a general trend for student radicalism to move beyond the campus and into the community after 1974. 'The feminist struggle', they argued, 'must be extended far outside the confines of the Registry, and the university'.⁵⁶ Participatory democracy continued to provide an influential political framework for women's activism at Flinders after the People's Registry. Reflecting a commitment to consciousness raising, Women's Studies courses were

52 Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 100.

53 Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left*, 97.

54 'Counterfeit Left Exposed', SLSA.

55 Chris Beasley, 26 August 2021.

56 'Counterfeit Left Exposed', SLSA.

open to women outside the university.⁵⁷ Chris Beasley eagerly explained the radical pedagogy informing Women's Studies: 'We were asked to come together in tutorials, which might include people from the community who hadn't finished high school. The idea was to have a genuinely community-based knowledge grouping, consciousness-raising groupings in a way'.⁵⁸ Anonymous testimonies compiled for a 1987 publication by the Women's Studies Collective affirmed how radical education at Flinders encouraged political involvement. For one student, women's studies 'had a profound impact on my life, it challenged my previously held values and kindled my interest in feminism'.⁵⁹ When asked about the long-term impact of her activism, Judith Wotherspoon recounted meeting Helen Oxenham, an unenrolled Women's Studies student. Helen, she explained, established a women's shelter at Christies Beach: 'She would borrow material from the university and bring it down and the women could discuss it there, like having a tutorial but locally and informally'. Judith was uncertain as to why she related Helen's story to me: 'Anyway, I forget why I'm telling you this'.⁶⁰ However, far from being tangential to her experience of student activism, Judith's involvement in the women's shelter echoed a common process of radicalism becoming localised. Motivated by their view that the personal was political, many students worked in women's shelters and services. Judith's own participation in the women's movement not only gave her a sense of purpose, but embodied the shift described by Jeff Richards, of radicalism spreading 'further out into the community' after 1974.⁶¹

Echoing this perspective, Brian Medlin argued strongly against the 'false impression' that activism simply 'nose-dived' after the mid-1970s. 'In some ways', he argued, 'things improved' as radicals 'moved into cultural, education and other work of great importance'.⁶² Medlin's comments support a sceptical attitude towards narratives of

57 Yvonne Allen, 'The Silence Ends', in Penny Ryan (ed.), *A Guide to Women's Studies in Australia* (Melbourne: Australian Union of Students, 1975), 9.

58 Chris Beasley, 26 August 2021.

59 Women's Studies Collective, *A History of Women's Studies*.

60 Judith Wotherspoon, 15 September 2021.

61 Jeff Richards, 10 August 2021.

62 Brian Medlin, 'A Time of Revolt: An Account of the Late Sixties and Early Seventies', essay, date unknown, Box 1, Folder 10, Brian Medlin Collection, FUL.

straightforward decline after the People's Registry. Although activists were challenged by changes within the university and wider society, many directed their activities towards new issues and concerns and gravitated towards new political organisations. Chris Beasley's experiences in the student movement led her to develop an interest in Trotskyism, followed by her decision to join the Communist Party of Australia two years after the occupation. 'There were all these different versions' of socialism, Chris explained. 'But I thought "I think I'm more interested in the Eurocommunist version, which seems more concerned about egalitarian politics"...And they took women's stuff pretty seriously. Not as seriously as they ought to, but better than the other groups did'.⁶³ Mark Rohde, who subsequently became a trade union activist, reflected that 'the things we learnt about and the ways of thinking we got [through student activism] gave us a way to approach our work and our politics in the years that followed'.⁶⁴ One possible explanation for why the Maoists, in Jeff's view, seemed to disappear from campus is that many became employed at the nearby Tonsley Park Chrysler factory where they agitated among rank-and-file workers.⁶⁵ The formation of Maoist-influenced band, Redgum, in 1975 was an expression of Flinders activists attempting to make art, in Mao's phrase, serve the people.⁶⁶ Indeed, many student activists emphasised links with the working class and ordinary Australian people as they moved into the community.

'THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED THEN MADE ME WHO I AM NOW': RADICALISM'S AFTERLIVES

Activists often recalled a sense of radical optimism when narrating their youth. Julie Ellis spoke for many of her comrades when she described her belief that 'life would never be the same again' after the American defeat in Vietnam. 'We were going to have a revolution', Steve O'Brien laughed.⁶⁷ If historians accept a narrative of

63 Chris Beasley, 26 August 2021.

64 Mark Rohde, 6 September 2021.

65 See James Vigus, 'A Short March Down the Hill: Flinders University Student Radicals and the Rank and File Movement at the Tonsley Park Chrysler Factory, 1973–1977' (Honours thesis, Flinders University, 2012).

66 Judith Wotherspoon, 15 September 2021.

67 Steve O'Brien, 20 August 2021.

decline after 1974, we might expect that these Promethean hopes of social change have been replaced by diagnoses of failure and disillusionment. As Ronald Fraser noted as early as 1988, ‘much that seemed exhilarating, even triumphant, about the movements has been buried in memory by subsequent history’.⁶⁸ It is the case that the sheer utopianism of youthful radicalism is sometimes more clearly articulated in the pages of *Empire Times* rather than oral history interviews. Nonetheless, for many respondents, speaking with me was a means not just of remembering their younger selves, but of coming to terms with their past experiences of 1960s radicalism and reaffirming their activist identities in a changed political world. As Celia Hughes suggests, oral history interviews can function ‘as a means of remembering not only past activist selves, but reshaping political subjectivity’ in a contemporary political landscape.⁶⁹ Shortly after our interview, Anni Browning contacted me to emphasise that she still attends ‘demos’ for various issues.⁷⁰ Steve O’Brien stressed that he is engaged in more activism today compared to ‘what I did when I was however old then’. When recalling the People’s Registry, Steve interpreted the very act of remembrance as an affirmation of his Trotskyist identity:

I’ve got a reasonable memory for this stuff. Why? Theodor Draper wrote a biography of James P. Cannon and he said, ‘How come James P. Cannon can remember all of this stuff?’ and he says, ‘Because he wants to remember. Because he’s not ashamed of that’. So I’m not ashamed of that. I want to remember because I’m still a radical. I’m still a socialist. I’m still an activist.⁷¹

Steve’s comment reveals the extent to which oral remembrance is a reflexive process in which activists often reconstruct past events through the prism of present political beliefs. For Andrew McHugh, chiding the ‘establishment’ careers pursued by his peers was a way of affirming his own identity as a radical: ‘I just wish that a few people hadn’t given up quite as easily. Not that I think I’ve changed the world much,

68 Fraser, 1968, 6.

69 Celia Hughes, ‘Negotiating ungovernable spaces between the personal and the political: Oral history and the left in post-war Britain’, *Memory Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 72.

70 Anni Browning, personal correspondence with the author, 12 August 2021.

71 Steve O’Brien, 20 August 2021.

but I still have always tried to a little bit'. Andrew summarised his journey of radicalisation at Flinders in the following way:

When I went to university, I just became more aware of politics. I started going to the Moratoriums and reading up about stuff and trying to form some kind of coherent frame of reference for myself, but I still haven't quite been able to do it. But I suppose I'm probably now quite left of centre. I probably started out as a wishy-washy lefty. And the world has just moved... or at least in Australia [people have] moved further and further to the right.⁷²

Like others of his generation, Andrew is still actively attempting to find a meaningful political 'frame of reference'. This process was set in motion through the crucible of student politics and continues to this day. Steve O'Brien narrated a similar process:

When I went to Flinders University, it normalised radical and socialist behaviour to me...It was a belief system that has subsequently been supported or confirmed by the privileges and experiences I've had in my workplace, in my union activities and the fact that I've been able to live and work overseas and participate with comrades in other countries in struggles, and see the confirmation that this isn't just a middle-class schoolkid's thing, this is a serious struggle.⁷³

For Steve and Andrew, their experience of the last half-century has not discouraged a radical worldview. In fact, for Steve, the contemporary context of 'climate catastrophe and rising inequality' has reinforced his belief in the need for a socialist society: 'There is a hope for the world. And it's a hope I gained at school and it was confirmed by Flinders and subsequently confirmed throughout all the years, that there's certainly something worthwhile contributing your life to'.⁷⁴ In this way, activists often cast the Sixties as the beginning of an ongoing struggle for a more tolerant and equal society. Oral histories strongly suggest that many radicals did not

72 Andrew McHugh, 6 September 2021.

73 Steve O'Brien, 20 August 2021.

74 Steve O'Brien, 20 August 2021.

repudiate a vision of a better society. Instead, interviewees viewed their lives after university as a continuation of their activist experiences.

THEN AND NOW

Many of the 11 activists interviewed for this article were either modest or uncertain about the significance of their experience as student radicals. ‘It feels a bit strange’, Mark Rohde explained as we arranged to speak. ‘I am more used to wanting to read other people’s stories’.⁷⁵ Mark’s comment revealed how interviewees weigh up whether or not their own life narrative belongs to the history I have attempted to document. Although my questions emphasised activists’ experiences during their time at Flinders, I ended the interviews by asking participants if they felt that they had impacted society. ‘I’d like to think that we made a bit of a difference’, Anni Browning reflected.⁷⁶ Mark’s initial apprehension and Anni’s hesitancy when responding to my question indicate that I was looking for the story of Flinders student radicalism to fit into a conventional historiographical narrative of how youthful rebellion ‘changed Australian society forever’.⁷⁷ In reality, the impacts of student radicalism are often more intangible, making oral testimony a particularly significant source for understanding how the political became personal.

The process of interviewing former activists conveyed the long afterlives of student radicalism. Bob and Julie Ellis had preserved not just their memories, but dozens of newspapers, ASIO files and other documents that they eagerly shared with me. The snowballing recruitment process, in which initial interviewees volunteered other participants, clearly demonstrated the endurance of friendships and networks forged in activist groups and at street demonstrations. Many respondents indicated that their experiences as student radicals strongly influenced their careers and life choices. Bruno Yvanovich’s decision to pursue a career in the public service stemmed from the keen sense of social justice he had developed through his involvement in activism against apartheid and the Vietnam War. ‘I saw that as a way to continue working for

75 Mark Rohde, personal correspondence with the author, 3 September 2021.

76 Anni Browning, 12 August 2021.

77 Meredith Burgmann and Nadia Wheatley, *Radicals: Remembering the Sixties* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2021).

the common good', he said.⁷⁸ As Anni Browning explained, 'A lot of the things that happened then made me who I am now'.⁷⁹ Judith Wotherspoon emphasised how she has 'lived on those memories all these years'. For her, being part of the People's Registry 'was the best political lesson I've had in my life'.⁸⁰

The streets and the sit-in, rather than the classroom alone, it seems, offered students a lifelong political education. Formative experiences of student radicalism, such as labouring over a hot printing press, political debate and attending demonstrations, helped cohere long-standing activist identities. Mark Rohde was certain that he 'learnt a lot more through activism' than his academic studies at Flinders.⁸¹ In this sense, activism functioned as a 'school' that gave students the skills they took with them to their subsequent roles as educators, researchers, trade unionists and community leaders. Involvement in the 1974 occupation and the student movement at Flinders 'gave me a means to be comfortable with the way I approached my politics in the workplace', Mark reflected.⁸² Student activism offered Bruno Yvanovich fundamental skills 'about working in organisations, meeting procedures, dealing with papers for committees and learning to stand up in front of a group and speak with confidence'.⁸³ For Anni Browning, the fact that she 'never got a degree anyway' didn't matter, as 'it was much more about being at Flinders to get a much broader education'.⁸⁴

The memories of former student activists are undoubtedly shaped by the different trajectories they took throughout their adult lives. Learning how to 'work in the system...to get things done', Ian Yates experienced perhaps the most significant evolution. Several decades after having played a leading role in the People's Registry, he became deputy chancellor of Flinders University in 2007. In light of his

78 Bruno Yvanovich, interviewed by author, online, 17 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

79 Anni Browning, 12 August 2021.

80 Judith Wotherspoon, 15 September 2021.

81 Mark Rohde, 6 September 2021.

82 Mark Rohde, 6 September 2021.

83 Bruno Yvanovich, 17 August 2021.

84 Anni Browning, 12 August 2021.

subsequent professional career, it is understandable that Ian indicated some remorse for his past actions. He recounted an occasion when police arrived at the Flinders Student Representative Council office, looking to arrest him for draft resistance:

I walked out the back end of the office, went up to the Refectory and grabbed some of my mates and said, 'We've got Commonwealth Police on the campus'. And within about half an hour, we had this huge demonstration saying – I probably regret it now, but saying – 'Pigs off campus, pigs off campus'. So, I mean, we were nasty to them when it's not them, they were doing their job.⁸⁵

The flow of Ian's animated narration was interrupted by a sense of regret. The discomfort associated with such memories of protest, however mild, does suggest the contested character of student radicalism. Interviews, as Mark, von der Goltz and Warring explain, are full of 're-workings' as activists give meaning to their past.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, perhaps because of a general tendency to emphasise continuity between the narrated and narrating self, the disclosure of remorse was not a common feature of most interviews. Echoing the views of many interviewees, Anni Browning was unambiguous about her time as a radical, saying 'I look back at it fondly, I must say. There's no regrets'.⁸⁷ Regardless of what activists thought should or should not have happened during that period of radical commitment, all interviewees undermined a narrative of disillusionment or decline. While we should be wary of generalising the experiences of a generation from the select sample of activists who agreed to speak with me, what emerges is the long-term impact of student activism on the personal lives of those who experienced it.

Due to my own prejudices, I admit that I had initially expected to encounter ageing activists who would either repent aspects of their youthful radicalism or explain to me why their generation's political contributions were superior to the apathy

85 Ian Yates, 14 August 2021.

86 James Mark, Anna von der Goltz and Annette Warring, 'Reflections', in Robert Gildea, James Mark and Annette Warring (eds), *Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 283.

87 Anni Browning, 12 August 2021.

of students today. Instead, I met a cohort of people who offered highly considered reflections on the strengths and limitations of their radicalism during the long 1960s. They maintain a pride in their past activism and empathise with students today who face new challenges such as increasing tuition fees.

Contemporary commentators wrongly portrayed the dramatic events of the People's Registry as the concluding chapter of activism at Flinders University. Similarly, contemporary historians might be tempted to believe that the only remaining traces of student radicalism are yellowing newspapers or leaflets in a library archive. This article has drawn on the memories and experiences of student activists themselves to demonstrate the continuing importance of such events as the People's Registry in the lives of those who experienced them. In the case of Flinders University, mapping both the immediate aftermath and longer afterlives of the 1974 student occupation challenges a problematic narrative of the People's Registry as a 'last hurrah' of the Vietnam generation. Oral history narratives have an important role to play in further unearthing the longer-term personal impact of political radicalisation and, in doing so, creating a more complete portrait of student activism during and beyond the long 1960s.

APPENDIX 1

NAME	GENDER	ENROLLED DEGREE AT THE TIME OF THE 1974 OCCUPATION	POLITICAL AFFILIATION
Andrew McHugh	Male	Unenrolled. Editor of <i>Empire Times</i> and printer for the Flinders University Students Association.	Unaffiliated
Anni Browning	Female	Unenrolled. Formerly enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts.	Unaffiliated
Bob Ellis	Male	Master of Arts (University of Adelaide)	Adelaide Revolutionary Marxists

NAME	GENDER	ENROLLED DEGREE AT THE TIME OF THE 1974 OCCUPATION	POLITICAL AFFILIATION
Bruno Yvanovich	Male	Graduate (Bachelor of Science)	Unaffiliated
Chris Beasley	Female	Bachelor of Arts	Socialist, Euro-communist and socialist feminist. Influenced by radical feminism.
Ian Yates	Male	Graduate (Bachelor of Arts). Secretary of the Flinders University Union.	Unaffiliated
Jeff Richards	Male	Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science	Socialist Youth Alliance
Judith Wotherspoon	Female	Not provided	Not provided
Julie Ellis	Female	Graduate (Bachelor of Teaching, University of Adelaide)	Adelaide Revolutionary Marxists
Mark Rohde	Male	Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Economics	Unaffiliated at the time of the occupation, but committed to Maoism in early 1976
Steve O'Brien	Male	Bachelor of Arts	Socialist Youth Alliance

Based on information and descriptions recalled and provided by participants.