



THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

HISTORY CLUB

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

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PREFACE

This journal is the third in a series commenced in 1976. In that year it was decided to publish the most original and best presented papers received in Australian History. The essays involved original research and frequently touched on local history topics.

The 1976 initiative has attracted a good deal of favourable comment. The journal now in fact circulates to most Australian libraries.

Our students this year have maintained the standards of previous years. The papers are relevant and imaginative. Congratulations are extended to those whose papers have been selected for publication to the "honorable mentions" listed below, and to the many other students who invested energy and hours in the project.

Howard Byfield

Graham Byrnes

Suzanne Javes

David Kilby

Danny McCloghry

Stephen Pullin

Tim Wellcox

"The Settlement of the Rivers"

"Whaling off the East Coast of Australia"

"The Significance of the Hotel in Australian History"

"The Federated Seamens Union of Australasia and the 1925 Elections"

"Governor Phillip and Major Ross – the Settlement under Strain"

"St. John's Theological College – Armidale to Morpeth"

"The Bush Myth in the Australian Legend."

C. Bacchi

P. Hempenstall

N. Rutherford.

Once again, the History Club is pleased to be associated with the presentation of this collection of essays. The finished product is a fitting tribute to the authors of the essays as well as Carol Bacchi, Peter Hempenstall and Noel Rutherford of the History Department who initiated the whole project.

History Club Executive.

E. H. BURGMANN AND THE DEPRESSION IN NEWCASTLE 1930 – 33.

IDEAS AND PRACTICE.

by

JENNIFER CRONIN

SYNOPSIS:

Burgmann was warden of St. John's Theological College at Morpeth from 1926 to 1934. His reputation in Newcastle during the Depression was that of a radical clergyman with equally radical social and political views. Through his widely publicised attitudes to the Depression, unemployment, Communism and other related issues, he earned the reputation of a "red", a "liberal" and a "radical". His image was that of an Australian bushman who would champion the cause of the working class. However, Burgmann is as difficult to categorise in his political beliefs as in his theology. It is hard to determine how much of his reputation was justified and how much created for him by those who considered him a hero. This paper attempts to examine, firstly, his views on the Depression and unemployment, secondly how these were put into action, and thirdly to judge whether his reputation as a radical was justified. The paper also attempts to examine Burgmann's view of the Church's responsibilities towards the unemployed. It attempts to illustrate his belief in education of the people to help them alleviate their conditions. The Clara St. eviction case in 1932, and the Synod resolution to double the dole, in 1933, are used as examples of Burgmann's ideas in practice.

In the light of his reputation as a champion of the working class, Burgmann's actual achievements on behalf of the unemployed seem at first glance, paltry. The two most controversial and public episodes in which he involved himself during the Depression brought little direct improvement in the living conditions for the large population of unemployed in the Newcastle region. The significance of his participation in the Clara St. eviction issue is uncertain, although the acquittal of the defendants was attributed to him.¹ The resolution put to Synod in 1933, in favour of doubling the dole, certainly expressed genuine concern for the unemployed in their distress, yet seems grossly impracticable. However, to judge Burgmann on the results of these incidents is to misunderstand his conception of his role as Churchman during the crisis years of the Depression. His stand is made clear in a letter to Batty in 1931. He envisioned a "mediatory ministry" in which it was necessary

"to have a sympathetic understanding of the viewpoints and aspirations of the leaders of all the conflicting forces that are operating in the national life. We might be able to do much to help keep people calm and clearheaded in a time of great distress."²

Burgmann's responsibility was to people, not to party politics. Burgmann hoped to create an awareness of social injustice in the community, and to encourage its underprivileged members to take up political lobbying for reform. He believed that "the highest welfare of society must be the highest welfare of the individual."³

Thus Burgmann saw himself in an educatory role rather than in a political one. His real 'radicalism' lay in his view, that the Church should provide a similar lead. Unfortunately few shared this opinion. The Anglican Church in Newcastle traditionally did not associate itself with protest.⁴ If Burgmann was a radical, he was so only in comparison with his fellow clergy. Bishop Batty, for example, preferred to limit his activities to traditional church concerns: "It is definitely not the business of the Church as such to propound economic theories or schemes of social and industrial reform"⁵ The Protestant churches have been judged by historians as being "to the right of centre in their response to the Depression ... advocates of 'sound finance'."⁶ This conservative attitude of the Church angered Burgmann as he felt that it did not relate to the Australian people. He believed that many people were unable to accept the spiritual ministry of the Church because it appeared to be part of the system that was causing them such hardship.⁷ From his own observations and his work with the W.E.A. [Workers Education Association]⁸ he was well aware of the deprivations suffered by the miners and industrial workers of the area. The opportunity of the Church to take an active part in fighting the "social sin"⁹ of unemployment and its attendant miseries, was clear to him.¹⁰

Although such views resulted in his being called a communist, Burgmann was far from being so. His lectures to the W.E.A., his use of the Morpeth Press, and his articles and letters in the newspapers, were all part of Burgmann's attempt to help the people and their leaders in both Church and State, understand all sides of the issues surrounding the Depression and politics of the time. It concerned him that people should understand the issues they voted on, and so be able to improve their conditions by parliamentary means rather than revolution." To this end he constantly explained the faults and advantages of systems such as capitalism. He felt that:

"From the Christian point of view there is a fundamental defect in both capitalism and communism. Both at present accept a materialist philosophy of life and set out to organise human beings as so much machinery ... Neither rises to a conception of man as a personal and spiritual being."¹²

Burgmann was violently opposed to totalitarianism of any kind. To him the value of the individual was of paramount importance. Burgmann hoped to see society run neither on capitalism nor on communist lines, but rid of self-interests in order to "give the largest possible freedom to the individual and yet not allow man to prey on man."¹³ Where the economic problem of the Depression was concerned, Burgmann believed that there was "enough wealth in the world at present to permit everybody having a fair share" and that the "real problem would only be met when the public credit was marshalled controlled and used to put well planned public works into operation on a nation wide scale."¹⁴

So then, Burgmann's Christian principles, rather than his supposed political leanings, lead him to take a "radical" stand in political issues. An example was his attitude to an eviction incident at Tighes Hill, Newcastle in June 1932.¹⁵ A returned serviceman, unemployed and unable to pay the rent, was given notice of eviction of himself and his family. On arrival to supervise the eviction, the police were met by a crowd of protesters. Amid variously reported circumstances, fighting broke out and 8 protesters and 2 police were admitted to hospital; a number of arrests were made. This was not a minor incident. The brutal behaviour of the police and the political backpedalling of their superiors and the government, aroused much resentment and anger among the people of Newcastle.

There was some dispute as to how the fighting started but witnesses insisted that the police attacked first without warning.¹⁶ The papers carried lengthy accounts of the incident and there was widespread speculation about the motives of the authorities. The affair became a major subject of letters to the editor and appeals were launched to raise funds for the defence of those arrested for participation in the violence.¹⁷ The papers throughout June recorded continuing arrests of participants, and reports of the numerous meetings of Trade Unions and other protesting bodies kept pace.¹⁸ There was general resentment against the system which firstly kept a man unemployed, and then turned him out on the street.

In the subsequent court case in Newcastle, 18 of the 30 defendants, who had been charged with riotous behaviour and obstruction of the police, were acquitted, but the remaining 12 were committed for retrial at a venue outside Newcastle. The choice of Singleton for the new trial appeared to many people as a deliberate attempt to obtain a conviction since it was clear that another Newcastle jury would be unlikely to find the men guilty. To many, the unemployed seemed to be confronted by a system which could not be beaten, and which has no regard for their welfare. Burgmann, by means of attendance at public meetings and correspondence with the papers, had been a participant in the debate. With the move for a retrial he was able to take a more prominent part.

A public meeting was called in Newcastle Town Hall on 8th November, to protest the change of venue for the trial and to organize a deputation to the Premier.¹⁹ Burgmann, with his reputation as a speaker on such matters from his association with W.E.A., was invited to address the meeting. He spoke on the aims of the jury system and summed up all the salient features of the debate. If the trial was moved to Singleton, the defendants' right to challenge was useless and the Crown could pick the jurymen and judge. This contravened the principles of representation and community judgement. Furthermore, no adequate reason was given for the change of venue. The case belonged "to the Newcastle people and the Newcastle atmosphere" and to take it to the pastoral setting of Singleton would set it in a different climate of feeling.²⁰ As far as Burgmann was concerned, and many agreed – This led to only one possible conclusion: a conviction was deliberately being sought. Burgmann suggested "concentrated fire on the Premier"²¹ as a means of action, and if that failed, more meetings and resolutions. The speech was strongly commended by Dr. H. V. Evatt, Justice of the High Court.²² Burgmann's speech was made into a pamphlet and circulated throughout Singleton. When the jury there also refused to convict the defendants, Burgmann was given the credit.²³ How much this was justified is debatable, but he was certainly a man whose views had created a large following by this time. This is a large generalisation very hard to verify among thinking people. The resolution of the issue did not lead to any largescale social reform but it did demonstrate to the unemployed that they possessed the potential to defend themselves against social injustices. Attention was effectively drawn to the problems of unemployed people in similar circumstances. Assurances were given by the authorities that no more evictions would take place under such circumstances and that all would be done to prevent evictions taking place at all.²⁴ There was widespread agitation to make the government provide a rent allowance to the unemployed and deputations were sent to the Premier.²⁵ Clergymen as a body were even stirred to participation.²⁶

Burgmann had been active in other areas before the Clara St. furore. Through his lectures for the W.E.A. Burgmann had become familiar with the problems of miners and industrial workers and he used this platform to express his views on unemployment and poverty.²⁷ As well, his lectures illustrated his ideas on education and society. Education should "enable men and women to achieve the full enjoyment of their personal powers and abilities... that these ... will be used in such a way that the service of Australia will be a natural expression of the service of God and man."²⁸ Many of these lectures were printed in full in the Newcastle Morning Herald, as were some of his articles.²⁹ A review of his article "The Fight Against Poverty", was published in the Herald in October 1932.²⁹ The Editor was so struck by "the burning zeal for humanity" it expressed that despite his opposition to Burgmann's political stand, he invited Burgmann to send in anything else he wanted to have printed.³⁰

The result was a profusion of articles and letters by Burgmann, concentrated around the time of the Clara St. debate in November; this may have had some bearing on the credit attributed to Burgmann in the case. A series of articles on "Capitalism and Christianity" showed the "world of difference between the spirit of Capitalism and the spirit of Christianity."³¹ In a November article he made an interesting summation of the attitude of society towards unemployment:

"The bourgeoisie mind is rooted in self-interest and competitive struggle... It is a matter of climb hard and reach the top before the other fellow., When he is secure, then he can afford to dispense charity."³²

The letters to the Editor commenting on his articles show the respect in which his views were held by thinking people.³³

By 1933, Burgmann seemed to be making headway in his efforts to arouse the social conscience of the Church and Government. In 1930 he had been instrumental in the appointment by Synod of a Select Committee to report on social and industrial problems.³⁴ He himself was appointed to the Committee as were the Dean of the Cathedral and Shellshear, two of his co-workers in the dole resolution. In 1932 the latter two men passed a Synod resolution stating that "work is the moral and spiritual need of every man".³⁵ Thus when the issue of unemployment came up in Synod in 1933, it did not represent a radical departure. However few would have predicted that the conservative non-political Anglican Synod would be stirred to take the political field on behalf of the unemployed. A resolution was passed in favour of political lobbying to double the dole, and to pay half of it in cash.³⁶ The resolution is all the more surprising in the light of Bishop Batty's previously quoted statement. Burgmann proposed the final form of the resolution and worked to have it passed. His pamphlet "Justice for all and the case for the Unemployed" set out the arguments in favour of the resolution;³⁷

"Our greatest danger is that fatalistic mood in which we inwardly decide that nothing can be done. Something can be done. The dole can be doubled. This will bring life and hope to thousands."³⁸

The resolution was passed unanimously. It is evident that Burgmann and his friends had been preparing the ground for some time.

The Herald gave generous space to the account of the proceedings of the Synod motion and Burgmann's speech was recorded in full.³⁹ On the basis of the Federal Statistician's Report, he claimed that 25 – 30% of trade unionists were permanently unemployed. Industry could not deal with the problem but something must be done at both State and Federal levels, and a solution to alleviating the conditions of the unemployed could be found in doubling the dole. Copies of the Synod resolution were sent to all members of State and Commonwealth Parliaments whose electorates were within the Diocese.

Although on the surface economically naive, the proposal to double the dole had a sound basis. The Rev. Lee quoted to Synod the findings of a wellknown economist, who declared that "an increase in the dole would be of benefit to the state ... because of the need of doing everything possible to strengthen the primary industries... Stimulation of consumption."⁴⁰ The motion was applauded by the Trades Hall and union officials.⁴¹ It was followed by a campaign by Burgmann to encourage public support for the petitioning of the Premier. His method was as usual, public address and letters to the papers. At public meetings he received enthusiastic support.⁴² Momentum was added to the campaign when the Synod of Riverina and Armidale and the Presbyterian Assembly of N.S.W. all passed resolutions in favour of increased assistance for the unemployed.⁴³ In a letter to the editor in June Burgmann wrote;

"If churches, trade unions, shire councils... and party organisations could forget their political dogmas and sink their social prejudices for one month and face the facts of unemployment as a great national tragedy, we could at least make the conditions of the unemployed human and endurable. The task is not beyond the powers of a united people."⁴⁴

Unfortunately, the members of Parliament as a whole did not share his view. In their replies to Synod, most gave accounts of what was already being done. Replies ranged from a balance sheet of assistance to the unemployed,

from the Department of the Interior, to the enthusiasm of R. James M.H.R. who expressed his hope that the resolution would be "readily accepted by the responsible leaders of government in Australia."⁴⁵ Some replies were noncommittal or answered that "the matter has been taken up in the appropriate quarter".⁴⁶ Most replies were self justifying, or as in the case of A. Howarth member for Lorn, openly sceptical; "kindly advise me how the Synod proposes to raise the necessary money to carry out their suggestion".⁴⁷

Despite those reactions the Synod's pressure was not entirely futile. An editorial on March 24 stated "if the effect of the Synod's decision is nothing else but a reminder to the State and Commonwealth of the poignant realities associated with unemployment, it will be beneficial".⁴⁸ This proved to be the case as the government finally granted extra relief to the unemployed.⁴⁹ Whether Burgmann and the Anglican Synod can take the credit for this move is uncertain, but there is little doubt that their campaign exerted a significant and unusual pressure on the State governments in the depth of the Depression.

Whatever the results, it is clear that Burgmann was held in respect by the working class for speaking out in defense of the unemployed. At a public meeting in Cardiff in November, where Burgmann had spoken in favour of petitioning the Premier, the Chairman said "It was pleasing that men of the calibre of Mr. E.H. Burgmann were prepared to associate themselves with a movement that aimed at bettering the condition of the working class."⁵⁰ There is no doubt that Burgmann made full use of his position as a public figure to put forward the interests of the oppressed classes, and it would seem that the greatest justification of his reputation lies in this. If he was a radical, it was only in comparison to his fellow churchmen. His real achievements as a "champion of the working class" were in the realm of educating people to a social awareness and stirring them to take action themselves by his own example. That he was held in respect by the working class of Newcastle for his attempt to help them improve their conditions during the Depression, was seen at his consecration as Bishop of Goulbourn in Newcastle Cathedral in May 1934. The building was "crowded with Trade Unionists", unusual in a Church which has a predominantly middleclass laity.⁵¹ If only as a mouthpiece for the problems of the unemployed of the Depression, it would seem that his reputation as a supporter of working class interests is no more than he deserves.

FOOTNOTES:

1. H. Oakes, "The Episcopate of E.H. Burgmann". M.A. thesis for A.N.U. 1966 unpublished p.31
2. Batty's correspondence, archives of Newcastle Uni.library. Letter from Burgmann at St. John's College Morpeth to Bishop Batty, 6/9/31
3. Morpeth Review, June 1928, "The Problem of Life", E.H. Burgmann p.8
4. Pam Lane, "The Episcopate of Francis de Witt Batty" B.A. Honours Thesis Newcastle Uni. unpublished p.66
5. Anglican Diocese of Newcastle Yearbook, 1932, p.79
6. Loius and Turner, The Depression of the 1930s, 1968, Melbourne p.70
7. Ibid, p.71 View of Church expressed by minister of Cessnock, Alan Walker
8. Oakes, Op.cit., p.30
9. Pam Lane, op.cit., p.16 unemployment was "a social sin and judgement will fall on the community that allows it to continue." Quote from E.H. Burgmann The Beginning and End of Things.
10. Oakes, op.cit., p.104. "Just where the Church is making social justice a live issue it would be difficult to say... I believe that the Church has a large opportunity but I am not very hopeful of that opportunity being seized in time." Letter from E.H.B. to P.T. Kirk, 21 October, 1938
11. "Sane Socialism" The Future of Labour. Address to Carrington branch of the Labor Party, advocating the methods of British Socialists. N.M.H. Nov. 7 1932 p.5
12. E.H.B. Religion in the Life of the Nation, St. John's College Press, Morpeth, 1930, p.31
13. Morpeth Review March 1931, no.15 p.12
14. N.M.H. Nov. 1 1933
15. A lengthy account of the event was published in the N.M.H. 15th June, 1932
16. N.M.H. June 15 1932
17. N.M.H. June 18 1932
18. N.M.H. June 16, Meeting of Sec. of Trades Hall with Sec. of Police.
N.M.H. June 17, meeting of ex-servicemen's Trade Union movement report of charges made.
N.M.H. June 18 2 letters to the editor on eviction case
N.M.H. June 20, charges made
N.M.H. June 21, Carrington A.L.P. criticises N.M.H. support of police, report of further charges
N.M.H. June 22, four more convictions
N.M.H. June 27, conference of Trade Unions and Unemployed Workers Movement in Newcastle.
N.M.H. June 29, meeting of clergymen to send deputation to the Premier Dean of the Cathedral included.
N.M.H. Nov. 9 1932, "almost all the councils except Waratah and City, plus all the Trade unions had registered protests to the Minister for Justice."
19. Full report in N.M.H. Nov. 9 1932 p.6
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. St. Mark's Review Feb. 1961, No. 23 p.5
23. Oakes, op.cit., p.31
24. N.M.H. June 16 1932 p.7
25. eg N.M.H. June 27 1932, conference of Trade Unions and Unemployed Workers movement.
26. N.M.H. June 29, 1932. meeting of "clergymen, industrial representatives and public bodies to ask government to provide a rent allowance for the assistance of unemployed tenants and small landlords.
27. Oakes, op.cit., p.30
28. E.H.B. The Education of an Australian. p.95
29. Morpeth Review, "The Fight Against Poverty" E.H.B. N.M.H. Oct. 22' 1932
30. Oakes, p.30

31. N.M.H. December 2, 1932
32. N.M.H. Nov. 10, 1932.
33. N.M.H. Dec. 12 p. 3, letter to the editor from T. Johnson in reply to "Capitalism and Christianity."
34. Synod Minute Book, Sept. 1930, p.93 Newcastle Uni Archives AB707437
35. Ibid. 1932 p.344
36. Text of resolution in Synod Minutes 1933. AB707437 also in Yearbook of Diocese of Newcastle 1933 and N.M.H. 28/3/33
37. Oakes p.33
38. Oakes p.33
39. N.M.H. 23/3/33
40. N.M.H. March, 24, 1933
41. Ibid
42. eg Cardiff meeting at Lucas Hall, N.M.H. Nov. 1 1933
43. Editorial N.M.H. June 2, 1933
44. Letter to the Editor N.M.H. June, 2 1933
45. Synod Correspondence, Uni of Newcastle Archives. AB 7412 letter of R. James to F. Channon, 1933
46. Synod Correspondence, Uni of Newcastle Archives, AB7412 letter of P.Conoly to F. Channon.
47. Synod Correspondence, Uni. of Newcastle Archives AB7412 letter of Howarth to F. Channon
48. N.M.H. March 24
49. Oakes, op.cit., p.34
50. N.M.H. Nov. 1, 1934
51. St. Mark's Review Feb., 1961, No. 23, Goulbourn, p.5

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