

Bill Tully (1937-2021)

If there were a good cause getting underway in Canberra in the decades after 1970, Bill Tully was lending a hand.

Bill and I met when he enrolled for history honours at the ANU, writing his thesis on the New Guard. When I moved flats, he turned up to help re-stack the bookcases.

After we both left the ANU at the end of 1974, we crossed paths in the Library or three decades. As the reference librarian in charge of newspapers and micro-fiche, Bill guided doctoral candidates through uncatalogued cabinets of U.S. Congressional Records and the like. More than that, his knowledge of the collection meant that he could not only find every item you requested but also provide references to related ones.

In 1983, Bill fought to remove asbestos from the National Library, backed by the Trades and Labour Council, led by its President and BLF Secretary Peter O'Dea. Hardie Bros ran the line that asbestos was harmless and the Feds that it was harmless unless you tried to remove it. *The Canberra Times* abused the unionists for not compromising. With fellow union rep Bob Brittain, Bill organised the staff to insist on removal – one of the earliest successes in curbing the mass murder that still takes 4,000 Australian lives every year. Killing, as we know, is not murder when done for profit.

Bill's cultural interests and activism were as broad and as deep as his political ones, and woven into each other.

When the ALP administration closed the Kingston Branch of the Public Library Service, Bill joined with the locals, getting retired librarians together into a Defend Public Libraries Committee to organise public meetings. He also spent time helping the residents to set up a community-based free library, cataloging the donations and helping to staff the hut they hired.

He joined Community Radio 2XX when it opened in 1976, spending years as its movie critic and host of a political discussion show, while training newcomers to manage the cantankerous console. After thirty years, he had to battle against the new breed of presenters who thought the station was their preserve. Bill never shifted from his principle that the station belonged to its listeners – that it was the community's radio, or it was a nullity.

For Bill, community was no unseen element somewhere out on the ether. He seemed to be on first-name terms with every waif and stray, and with every seller of the *Big Issue*. Yes, he had his hand in pockets for them but more than that he gave them a few minutes of his time, capturing their exchanges in several of his poems.

Canberra Community News from 1976 and its republican successors. From 1987 to 2001, he edited *Blast!*, drawing its title from Wyndham Lewis and the Vorticists but, in this case, as one more anti-war statement behind the Nuclear Disarmament Campaign with Dorothy Green.

In retirement, he staffed the lending room of the Canberra Record Society until downloads convinced the rest of the committee to pass their treasures to the local fine music station.

He edited the quarterly literary and comment *Voices* from 2002 with Stephen Matthews, founder and publisher of Ginninderra Press

Bill published two collections of his verse in 2010 and in 2011. 'Life and Death in Canberra' gives their flavour:

1

Godwin Grech has done his stretch
of service to the crown
An email stitched, facts from a ditch,
G's prospects now fly blown.

2. Ric Throssell loved Australia dear;
soldier, worker, actor, seer
with Marxist mum and digger dad.
They got their gongs; not so their lad
Whose work though much malign'd; he held his head sky high
Til with his long-term loving wife he chose his time to die.

3. Oh demos! Fragile threatened state
hard gained, elusive, too soon lost,
though Can'bra's cap may drop from pate,
make bodies stir and sinews flex, but also keep those fingers crossed!

A key activist in the Australian Independence Movement, helping out on street stalls very weekend during the years of rage after 1975. Trained as an accountant, Bill put those skills to work as treasurer for the ACT branch of the Independent Scholars, and the Labour History Society. He wrote the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry for the militant worker, Ray O'Shannessy, with whom he had campaigned to save public housing from the developers who flourished under our so-called self-government.

After Bill retired, we often caught the same bus and reinforced each other's outrage at the usual suspects, Bush and Howard, Gillard and Obama. During those rides, I began to sense that Bill was developing dementia. It was one thing to rehearse our prejudices. It was another when Bill began to repeat his rhetorical questions. His family found him a residential place here before taking him to Melbourne where he died on October 12.

I began by saying that Bill was always there to lend a hand. I'll conclude with a cause where he often seemed to the lone hand – his commitment to the East Timorese. Throughout the twenty-five years to 1999 Bill never ceased to campaign. Every year he arranged a protest in Garema place. There were times when almost no one came except the speakers – notably, then as now, Bernard Collerary, and the local member, the late Ken Fry. Bill kept in touch with activists across the country, and rounded us up to show the flag when Jill Jolliffe or Shirley Shackleton came to lobby. He never showed the least sign of being a Knight of the Mournful Countenance.

This commitment to the Timorese exemplified his politics and character. Bill wasn't in for the long haul. Bill was in for the endless bloody haul.

Humphrey McQueen Canberra 17 October 2021