

Jeremy Fisher

Gay Liberation

In February 1973, I set out to find Gay Liberation—not the philosophy, which was vaguely coalescing inside my head, the organisation.

I'd heard about Gay Liberation because of its recent demonstrations and the resulting hullabaloo in the press. It was a demonstrable part of the light of change beginning to shine across Australia since the election of Gough Whitlam just two months before in December 1972. Gay Liberation had broken away from the more conservative CAMP (Campaign Against Moral Persecution), which focused on law reform, to advocate more radical public activism.

CAMP itself was founded only in 1970. Gay Liberation as a movement was born in New York out of the Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village in 1969. These incidents were the first time homosexuals fought back against police harassment and discrimination. As a result, Gay Liberation espoused a radical philosophy more in line with the spirit of the times. This didn't make it more acceptable, just more visible.

The people in CAMP understood the need to work behind the scenes as well in order

to effect meaningful change. This was something I would not appreciate for many years, but I was young and silly, and momentous and meaningful change seemed realisable in that brittle, bright light of the first year of Whitlam.

In Gay Liberation, that seemed especially so. Yet I was only 18, and completely inexperienced not only in life but in sexual experience, and Gay Liberation, thanks to the press, was all I knew about being homosexual. I was aware of course that my sexuality was illegal, but that never concerned me. I regarded the laws as unjust, the same as I had felt about the Vietnam War, and now, thanks to Whitlam, our troops were no longer fighting there.

But as a young boy from the country I had no knowledge of Sydney's by then extensive homosexual underworld. In fact, I knew nothing about homosexual life with its network of secret beats where men met for furtive sex. My four months in the city had been spent working and longing, but totally abstinent.

I'd walked up and down Glebe Point Rd outside the Gay Liberation address and gone on my way several times before I summoned up enough courage to actually knock and enter the rundown building.

Back then, Glebe was a very down-at-heel suburb. The Glebe Estate, which makes up much of the suburb and runs mainly up the hill to the south of Glebe Point Road, was owned by the Anglican Church. The Church had neglected its role as a landlord for years. The streets stank of mould and other physical decay caused by overflowing drains and blocked or broken gutters.

Glebe Point Road itself was lined with empty shops. The few businesses that operated catered for people with the barest incomes. The shopkeepers could barely

afford to buy their stock, let alone maintain their premises. A greengrocer offered tired fruit and vegetables. The scuffed and torn lino on the shop floor covered rotting boards and termite infested joists. One day I reached for a bruised banana and my foot went through the floor.

Gay Liberation occupied a former shop at number 67. The building had the same odours of steamed cabbage, dust, dirty clothes and decay as the rest of the street with an added aroma of Indian spices. Perhaps this was a scented illusion created by the patchouli oil many people used for perfume back then. When I knocked, a man called Lance opened the door and invited me in.

I timidly sat down on one of the pieces of decrepit furniture in the front room and Lance and I began to talk. Within a few minutes of staccato conversation we discovered that he was from Goulburn as well, though I'd never met him before. He'd also been a member of the Communist Party for many years. He'd been married and had children but, influenced by the liberationist and feminist philosophies being discussed in the Party at that time, now decided to be open and honest about his sexuality. Gay Liberation was the logical next step in his life as a social activist.

I said I knew I was attracted to men. I stuttered that I believed I was homosexual and I didn't know where else I could go to meet people like me. Lance asked me whether I had ever used the beat in Belmore Park in Goulburn.

"What's a beat?" I asked him. He explained. I told him I wanted to meet other men now that I was in Sydney. I wanted to have sex but I had no idea of how to go about it. I realised I would have to meet other men with like interests. But where did you find them? I didn't know about beats. I had a vague idea there were bars and other

places where men like me met, but I didn't know where they were. I also knew that you kept homosexuality to yourself.

After this, Lance talked to me for about half an hour about oppression, the need for the oppressed to fight for their rights and how the ruling class used sexuality as a form of social control. He spoke of the need for the oppressed to throw off their shackles. For homosexuals, this meant they should come out and admit what they were and not live in the shadowy, secret world of beats and clandestine meeting places and transitory relationships. I listened and nodded. It all made sense.

Then we ended up on the mattress on the floor of his room having sex. That was what I *really* wanted. It didn't matter with whom. I enjoyed his arms around me, his stubble scratching my face, the taste of him. I left once again very satisfied, not really aware that I had come out, admitted I was homosexual, and had immediate, guiltless sex with another man.

This was the real Gay Liberation.

I returned to the Glebe house over the following few days and met other people. In keeping with the libertarian-feminist thinking that dominated at the time there were continual meetings, often consciousness raising groups. These were designed to instil confidence in individuals like me who were publicly announcing their sexuality. While this is still not an easy process today, back then, when homosexuality was still a crime punishable by imprisonment, coming out was an extremely fraught process.

Lance invited me to move into the Gay Liberation house and share his room. This seemed a perfect answer to my need for accommodation. I accepted. I thought it would be fun to live in a gay house.

However, Macquarie University was quite isolated and a long trek from Glebe. The bus services into the city from the university were infrequent. It took me several hours a day to travel to North Ryde from the gay house in Glebe and back. I did this journey for a week. Then there was a fire in the gas heater in the bathroom.

I came home from uni to find the house full of curious firemen, the chief of whom asked “Does your mother know you’re living here?” (she did, but not what sort of house it was). The bathroom was a scorched wreck. The fire combined with the travel convinced me I should live closer to Macquarie University. Within a couple of days I had arranged accommodation in the still under construction Robert Menzies College.

Unlike 67 Glebe Point Rd, the rooms of College were clean and spanking new, though the grounds were muddy and hazardous and builders, carpenters and plumbers were still finishing off my block. The College would not officially open until 1974. A first block was complete while a third block was an as yet shapeless accretion of poured concrete, white bricks and safety fences. My block wasn’t full, a reason why I had been able to gain entry after the commencement of first semester. Most of the other residents were housed in the first-completed block. But the other students were not as friendly as my companions in Glebe had been.

On campus I joined the small gay students’ group. In their book *Green Bans, Red Union* Meredith and Verity Burgmann recall I was elected Treasurer.¹ It was no big thing, though. There were no more than ten or twelve of us gays and lesbians in the group at any one time. As Treasurer, I was never responsible for any amount greater than \$20. Not that I had any reason to do so, but I didn’t advise the College, especially its Dean, the Reverend Alan Cole, of my on-campus activities.

I sensed the information wouldn't be received well. As well, in the College I was being encouraged to join in prayer and Bible discussion groups, but I resisted. While the College might have been run by the Anglican church, I didn't see why I had to subscribe to the church's teachings. The College's information pack clearly stated that it accepted students of all faiths.

My move to the College bit into the little bit of money I'd saved from my Christmas break work. While I had a Commonwealth Scholarship, it was means tested and pitifully small. My parents agreed to pick up the College fees for the first semester. Meals were included although the dining room and kitchen were not yet in operation. The Menzies students had to trudge through the construction mud to eat at Dunmore Lang College next door.

I'd chosen Macquarie, even though I'd been offered a place at Sydney, because it offered Linguistics. I'd also enrolled in Education, but in all other respects, despite the courses I'd chosen to study, I had no idea what I was doing or where I was headed. I had vague thoughts that I might become a teacher, but I knew I wouldn't be allowed into schools if I were open about my sexuality. Homosexuals were not acceptable as teachers in New South Wales schools in 1973.

It all became depressing, overwhelming, and I did what many before me have done. I tried to kill myself.

The Master of the College, Alan Cole, didn't like this. By all accounts, Cole served his church well, being particularly interested in ministering to Chinese congregations both in south-east Asia and Australia. But he had an uncompromising aspect to him. Archbishop Donald Robinson noted at his memorial service at St Andrew's cathedral

on 15 August 2003 that “he was a person of strong principle, immovable where truth and conscience were concerned”.² Truth and conscience, however, are not immutable. I had my own truth and conscience, both as valid as Alan Cole’s. My principles were as important to me as Cole’s were to him although, unlike Cole, I could respect an alternative point of view.

Ian Walker, an Anglican historian at the University of New South Wales, has examined the events following my suicide attempt in his doctoral thesis.³ Walker notes Alan Cole had an evangelical fervour that encouraged robust intervention. Personable on many levels, when it came to spreading the faith his zeal could become overwhelming.

Ian Walker interviewed Alan Cole in 1997 and quotes him as saying about me then: “I had to say to him ‘I’m sorry, I cannot accept the responsibility of you coming back into the College. If you want to accept Christian help, I can make it available to you. If you want to accept medical help or psychological help, I can introduce you. I can’t do anything other than that’ ... I think I made it quite clear to the students that I would not take ... active practicing homosexuals or active practicing heterosexuals in the College, because this was our Christian standard, and that was that.”⁴

What Alan Cole doesn’t mention is his belief that I was possessed by a Chinese mask given to me by my father or that he made a point of telling me I would not receive my bond back from the College because of the mess in which I had left my room. He also felt it necessary to tell me about the distress the cleaner felt, finding me in that dirty state, almost dead. While the thought of that cleaner, no doubt underpaid and overworked, still gives me pangs of guilt, Cole’s mention of her at that point indicated he had little sympathy for me. The combination of the cleaner, the

Chinese mask and the fact that he would not let a homosexual back into the College was an interesting way of voicing what he said was his compassion.

When we came out of the meeting with Cole, my father said: “You’re not going back there”, meaning into the College. I didn’t want to go, either. I wasn’t objecting to Cole’s attitude because I wanted to return to the College. My point was simply that Cole shouldn’t be imposing his own religiosity in a secular, university environment. It was a point of principle.

The events surrounding me caused a brief ripple on television and in print. The issue was even raised in the Senate where Senator Arthur Gietzelt asked then Attorney-General Lionel Murphy: “Will the minister take steps to see that all institutions receiving ...Federal funds accept the fundamental principle that no student will be discriminated against on the grounds of race, creed, politics or sexuality?”⁵

Mind you, by this time, I was under surveillance by Special Branch and ASIO, which was controlled by Murphy, but that’s another story.

Author Bio

Jeremy Fisher has been published extensively and has considerable experience as a writer and publishing professional, working as editor, publisher and manager. He worked in rights management and was Executive Director of the Australian Society of Authors before moving to academia.. Jeremy Fisher teaches writing practice and theory in varieties of genres. Jeremy's latest book is the novel *Music from another Country* (Fat Frog, 2009). More recently, he has short stories in the collections *Fear Factor: Terror Incognito* (Picador, 2010) and *Catching On* (Gay eBooks 2010).

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¹ Burgmann, Meredith, and Burgmann, Verity, *Green bans, red union: Environmental activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation*, UNSW Press, Sydney: p 141.

² Robinson, Donald, Tribute delivered at the memorial service for Dr Alan Cole, St Andrew's cathedral, 15 August, 2003. http://www.mq.edu.au/rmc/news/cole_tribute_2004.html (accessed 17 October 2005).

³ Walker, Ian. Doctoral thesis, UNSW. Chapter 10. *More Than Just A Case Of Old Testament Meets Gay Liberation*: Robert Menzies College and Jeremy Fisher, Macquarie University, 1973.

⁴ Walker, Ian, *op. cit.* Interview with the Reverend Dr Alan Cole, Mosman, 26th May 1997.

⁵ 'Murphy takes up ban on student' *Sydney Morning Herald* 12th September 1973.