

It Seemed like a Good Idea at the Time: A History of The Springvale Legal Service 1973-1993

by Kerry Greenwood; *Springvale Legal Service, Springvale, 1994; 102 pp; \$15 (\$12 concession) plus \$2.50 postage, softcover.*

This is a lively contribution to the ever-growing literature on community legal centres and alternative lawyers in Australia. In the hands of an energetic novelist like Kerry Greenwood, Springvale Legal Service's (SLS) history is presented in a very readable style.

The reader is taken on a guided tour back to some of the remarkable events, successes and struggles which are SLS's history: the opening of the organisation in February 1973; the development of the professional practice subject at Monash University in July 1975, following which law students could work at SLS for academic credit; and the publication of the landmark *Lawyers Practice Manual* in 1985. Throughout the book are the recurring themes of crises of funding and morale, which were specific to SLS but which are familiar to all community legal centre workers. These crises seemed terminal at the time, yet all were somehow overcome. Meanwhile, of course, clients have received assistance at SLS in numbers greater than at any other community legal centre.

Greenwood's approach is quite consciously not academic. Her work is based on her reading of the primary sources in the SLS archive (consisting of minutes of meetings, letters and newspaper clippings) and on the nine interviews she conducted. These sources are rarely mentioned in the text. Nor do they often appear in footnotes, which are generally reserved for witty asides. The book is arranged into ten chapters, and follows a strict chronological format. The main events for each year provide the basis for a series of connecting narratives.

Greenwood does not attempt to construct any broad arguments about the existence of SLS. She clearly, and with reason, argues that the law and society need organisations like SLS but her analysis does not go any further. There has been no great effort made to situate SLS's history into the broader political context of the last two decades. References are made to Whitlam, the Australian Legal Aid Office (ALAO) and the Legal Aid Commission of Victoria, but

they are more asides than informative discussions.

This is one aspect of the book which I found disappointing. In the preface, Greenwood writes that her book aims to interest anyone who wants to know what the 1970s were like. In this, she is only partially successful. The book will undoubtedly and deservedly hold interest for those people who were involved in the legal centres movement in the 1970s. But for those who were not, there is little, aside from the specifics of SLS's history, that will add to their understandings of the times.

In order to know what the 1970s were like, consideration might have been given to a range of questions. Why did legal centres suddenly start to spring up in the early 1970s? Why was their establishment seen by those involved to be a radical political action and not an act of philanthropy? What did legal aid consist of prior to this time? Why did Lionel Murphy establish the ALAO? How did this, and the existence of community legal centres, change legal culture in Australia?

This point aside, Greenwood has written a book which deserves to be read. Her talent as a writer is unquestionable. Particularly worthy of mention are her character descriptions, where her skill as a novelist is in full flight. For example, in describing Simon Smith, an SLS worker for 15 years, she writes: 'Simon Smith was striking. He still is. But in 1977, tall, thin, with a saturnine countenance (later enhanced by the 1982 addition of a black pirate's beard), straggling black hair, white teeth and his Auntie Peg's wobbly hand-knitted jumpers, he could not be ignored.' Greenwood's tribute to another community legal centre hero, Tim McCoy (who died in 1987) is particularly moving.

At the back of the book is a 40-page timeline which has been prepared by Lynn Buchanan and Judy Taylor. This, and the cartoons by Judy Horacek and Stuart Roth, which appear throughout, add enormously to the book's appeal.

It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time is an eminently readable account of the events and people who have contributed to the life of an extraordinary organisation.

JOHN CHESTERMAN

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Voices Behind the Razor Wire

The Sansbury Association Inc. and Patricia Tresize; Sansbury Association and the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement, November 1994.

107 Recommendations — Have They Been Implemented?

Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement and Aboriginal Justice Advocacy Committee, September 1994.

Voices Behind the Razor Wire is a response to the South Australian Government's 1993 implementation report on the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. It deals specifically with recommendations relating to prison experience and is written by the Sansbury Association and Patricia Tresize. The Sansbury Association is made up of Aboriginal prisoners at Yatala gaol in South Australia. Tresize at the time was a lawyer with the Aboriginal Legal

Rights Movement who dealt with prison issues. The report provides a first hand account of how Aboriginal prisoners at Yatala are experiencing whatever changes are said to have occurred as a result of the Royal Commission recommendations. It is clear from the report that a new State Government in 1993 and a new regime in prisons has outweighed any progressive changes which might have been implemented as a result of the Royal Commission's recommendations.