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TRANSCRIPT: PHILIP BRAY 8 August 2019

Given the limitations of time Philip has had to leave out many incidents and events. For this, he offers his apologies. What he has provided is an overview of his 50 years in Balmain.

Good evening everyone. Thank you Mo for your very generous introduction.

As Mo has indicated I've been around Balmain for a long time and much has happened in that time. But I will keep it brief, say 2 minutes – per year. Relax, I jest.

Approaching retirement I found myself in reflective mood and tonight I thought I would share some of those reflections with you. They concern my father's life, my life, books, Balmain and the intersections between them.

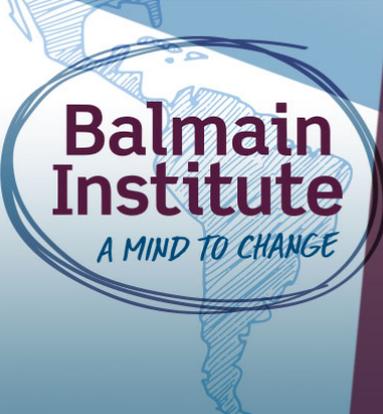
I was born in 1940 at the start of WW2 and my father served at the front in Borneo. He died when I was in my 20's. My father was born in 1913 at the start of WW1 and his father was in Egypt during the war. He died when my father was in his 20's.

From there our lives differ enormously largely because 1940 was a much better year to be born than 1913. Dad lived through the hardships of The Great Depression of the 1930's and through the even greater hardships and uncertainties of WW2. I have not lived through a Great Depression and WW3 has to date been avoided. My father died of cancer at age 54. I was diagnosed with cancer at age 69 but with the benefit of modern medicine I am still alive and kicking, or at least hitting a few tennis balls.

As the son of an impecunious clergyman and having experienced the great depression my father was determined that his family would not experience poverty. He succeeded. After the war his remarkable career took him from being a travelling salesman for the Nicholas Aspro company to being simultaneously Managing Director of both the Australian and British companies of a multinational pharmaceutical company.

His career resulted in frequent location changes and I grew up in different parts of Melbourne, Sydney and Melbourne again. I attended 4 primary schools and 3 high schools, I say attended rather than 'studied at' because my parents taught me tell the truth.

While I was able to make fresh friends at each location my constant companions were my bicycle, tennis racquet, any bouncing ball and books. Books have influenced and changed my life.



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While many books have influenced me four have changed my life. Those four are; The Bible, The Grapes of Wrath, Family and Kinship in East London and The Death and Life of Great American Cities. I'll come back to those later.

Tonight you received a list of books which have changed people's lives. That fascinating list clearly indicates that many different kinds of books can change individual lives and obviously for many individual reasons.

Books however have even wider beneficial effects.

There is for instance there is a growing body of evidence showing that children who read books do better at, everything.

A Utrecht University study in 2000 concluded that "people who read more character driven novels were better at empathy and understanding others."

Another study published in 2013 in The American Psychological Association Journal concluded that 'reading fiction will make you nicer and more empathetic'.

Aristotle commented on the importance of the stories of the Greek Tragedies. Among many others George Orwell, Bill Gates and Warren Buffet are great believers in books as agents for good. Barak Obama noted, "when I think about how I understand my role as a citizen....the most important stuff I've learned I learned from novels."

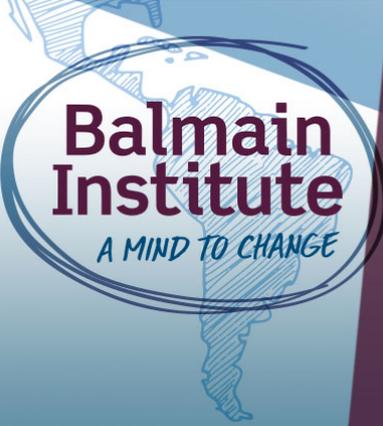
It goes without saying that we can learn much from non-fiction books but it is from fiction that we learn to appreciate the feelings of other people and especially the feelings of people who are 'other' to ourselves.

Steven Pinker postulates that in this way books have contributed significantly to making the world less violent. He makes a good case.

This is the timeless power of books, to present ideas and emotions, to set our brains in motion, to change our lives.

Let's head back to the books which changed my life.

'The Bible'. I am not a Christian but I am a great believer in the Christian ethic of 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' which is also an essential tenet of most faiths.



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In addition references from Bible stories pervaded and still influence our society and hence my life.

'The Grapes of Wrath'. This great novel opened my eyes to the horrific gap between 'haves' and 'have-nots' – to the tyranny of inequality. Re-reading does not diminish its power.

And now the other 2, the books that brought me to Balmain.

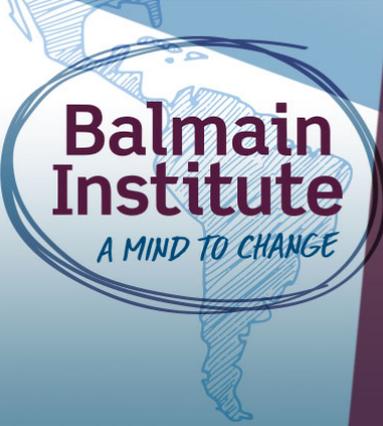
'Family and Kinship in East London' by Michael Young and Peter Willmott was a 1957 sociological study of an urban working class, close-knit community and the effects of post-war Britain's housing policies which led to their rehousing. Young and Willmott wrote about such benefits as having extended family within walking distance and the convenience of being able to leave your front door key at the corner shop for a visiting relative to pick up while you were at work. They wrote about real communities.

The second book is 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities' by Jane Jacobs. Published in 1961 this was a critique of 1950's planning policies in the U.S. Jane championed a community-based approach to city planning and building and she demolished the supposed rationale for ripping down swathes of old housing to build motorways or high-rise jungles.

These books so influenced me that when in 1966 I came unexpectedly to Balmain for my work I thought that I had found something close to paradise. I was correct. I knew immediately that I wanted to live here and to raise my yet to be born children here. I wanted them to grow up in this one place, to have a stable group of friends and go to schools in the local area.

Obviously this was in part a reaction to my own childhood and adolescence. But let me immediately defend my father's decisions which led us to move home so often. He was of his times and if I had faced the same circumstances I would very likely have made exactly the same decisions. Mind you along with the disadvantages of moving often there are some advantages, you learn to adapt pretty quickly. Certainly all my faults are mine alone and cannot to be laid at the door of my father.

In 1966 I was a North Shore boy and Margaret, my fiancé, was a North Shore girl. Consequently it was with some trepidation that I broached with her the idea of buying a



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house in Balmain because Balmain at the time was generally seen as a slum and home to criminals – the latter was true.

To my delight Margaret readily agreed. It so happened that her grandmother and great aunt had gone to Rozelle School, her mother was born in a house in Bruce St, Rozelle and her grandfather had worked as a journalist on the local Balmain newspaper.

The Balmain Peninsula was in effect her tribal ground so in 1967 the newly-wed Brays bought a little stone house in Balmain for the princely sum of \$9,300.

We soon became interested in local affairs through the Vincent St Chemical Farm issue where the then Council was in favour of establishing a storage facility for dangerous and flammable chemicals close to the Balmain Hospital and 2 schools. This issue brought me my first contact with 2 remarkable men, Nick Origlass and Issy Wyner.

Things moved quickly from then. I stood for Council in 1968. I was unsuccessful but it did result in my spending some time with Jack Lang, another extraordinary man. A former Premier of NSW Jack introduced legislation for a Widow's pension and Workers' Compensation in the 1930's. He became a great mentor to Paul Keating and in his 90's was still as sharp as a tack.

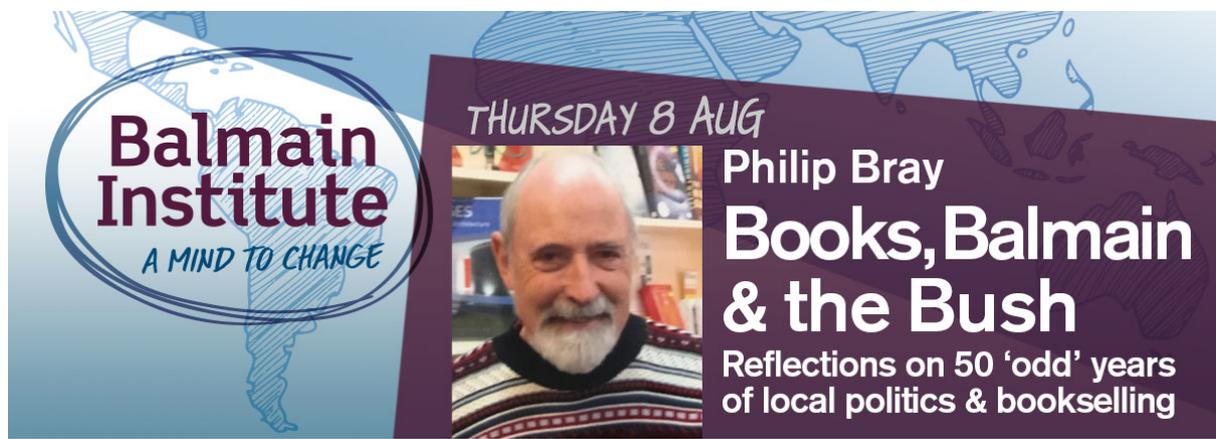
On April 8th, 1969 Margaret and I opened Brays Books in Balmain. What a year, man walked on the moon, Balmain won the rugby league premiership and Brays opened! And, by the way, Margaret Fulton moved to Balmain.

1970, what a year! My daughter Elizabeth was born.

1971, what a year! My daughter Melanie was born and I became deputy-mayor of Leichhardt.

So how did that come about? The deputy-mayor bit I mean.

The Leichhardt Municipality, which included Glebe at that time, had an entrenched, reactionary ALP Council. Now I am not anti-ALP. I am delighted to have photos of me with Gough Whitlam, with Julia Gillard and with my dear friend and comrade Tom Uren. I was however very anti that Council and so were other people many of whom, but far from all,



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were members of The Balmain Association, The Glebe Society and The Annandale Association.

One of the things which I had learnt over the previous few years was that many people thought that voting for an independent candidate was a waste of time. After all what could one independent do if she or he was elected?

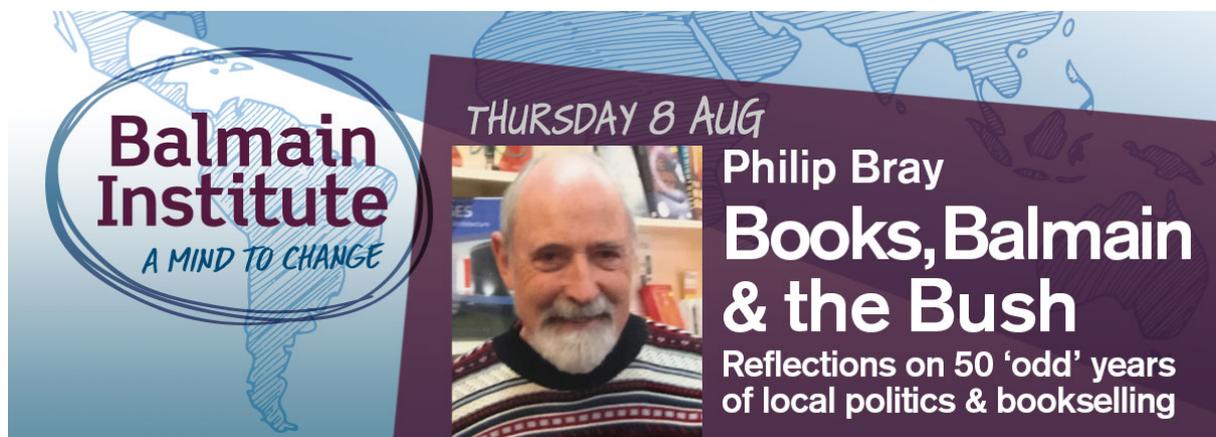
The answer to that attitude I thought was to create a cooperating group of independents with a broadly common policy agenda. I sought out and talked with activists around the municipality and then put my concept to them. I then convened a meeting of activists at which the concept was adopted and the Campaign for Better Council was born.

Glossing swiftly over the nut and bolts of reaching common policy, selecting candidates and the campaign itself we succeeded along with Origlass and Wyner in winning a Council majority.

We were seen in many quarters as dangerous left-wingers. My North Shore mother, who had handed out how-to-vote cards for us, was shortly after at a rather posh dinner. One of the other guests said how terrible it was that "the communists had taken over Leichhardt". "My son will be very interested to hear that", said my mother. "Oh, what does he do", said the other unsuspecting guest. "He's deputy-mayor of Leichhardt" my mother replied sweetly.

I mentioned that many people were anti the incumbent Council. There were a wide range of issues involved in this. The Town Plan as it existed coupled with the attitudes of Council meant that there was no protection for the essential fabric of our inner-city areas. Developers big and small considered the municipality and particularly Balmain and Glebe were ripe for the taking. If we had not won a majority in 1971 many Balmain cottages would have been demolished to make way for an invasion of red brick unit buildings. Hectares of beautiful Glebe terraces would have been demolished. I'll come back to that.

The incumbent Council operated as secretly as it could. Contact details of Aldermen, as councillors were then called, were not made available to the public. Council's business papers were not generally available. One copy, only one, could be accessed immediately prior to the meeting starting. Of course those papers would not contain any unannounced matters which might be introduced at the meeting 'as a matter of urgency'. There was little debate in Council as the majority decision had been decided prior to the meeting and the



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public were not allowed to address Council on any issues. Committee meetings were held 'in camera' and even sections of the General Meetings could be, and were, 'in camera'. Funny expression that. It sounds as if might mean 'open and filmed for the public' when it means the exact opposite.

The incumbent Council had no interest in wider public issues and simply submitted to State Government plans. Consequently Glebe, Annandale and Rozelle were threatened with major motorways which would have cut swathes through our housing stock and split those communities.

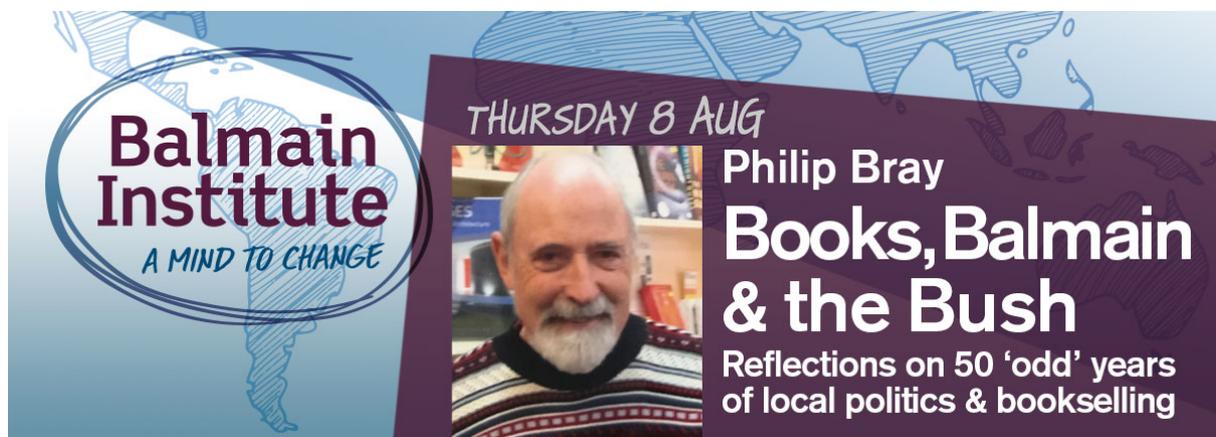
Once elected we needed to act quickly. At our first meetings after Nick Origlass and I were elected Mayor Deputy-mayor we removed the barrier which had physically and psychologically stood between Council and the public at Council meetings. We made Council's Meeting Papers available at each of our 4 Council offices in Glebe, Annandale, Leichhardt and Balmain, and we allowed the public to address Council meetings on matters in which they had an interest. It did mean that meetings often went well past midnight but as someone nearly said, 'democracy was not meant to be easy'.

We set up a number of committees and the general public was invited to participate in those. Among others we had a Town Planning Committee, an Anti-Radial Expressways Committee, a Tree Planting Committee and members of the public contributed very significantly to their work.

The Tree Planting Committee supervised the planting of many thousands of street trees transforming our public spaces.

Our Town Planning Committee was formed after we had placed a 2 storey height limit on any development pending the development of a new Town Plan. This 2 storey limit was profoundly important in saving The Glebe Estates.

The Glebe Estates were hectares of beautiful Victorian era terraces sitting on narrow but deep blocks of land. They were owned by the Church of England. The Church to their credit leased the houses out at cheap rents, essentially as public housing. The wisdom of the time said that these old houses were slums and the Church, acting according to that wisdom, had let the houses deteriorate to a near uninhabitable state. The Church expected and wanted



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to sell the Estates to be demolished and replaced with 'good modern blocks of units'. Negotiations were well advanced for this to happen

Our 2 storey limit stymied these plans but did not in itself save the Estates because with time any further deterioration would have rendered them structurally unsafe.

There was no way that Council could afford to buy the Estates. There was no way the State Government would buy and save the Estates.

Council approached Tom Uren, the recently appointed Federal Minister for Urban and Regional Development in the Whitlam Government, with a plan. If the Federal Government bought the Estates they could build infill housing at the back of the deep blocks, rehouse the tenants in those and then refurbish the magnificent terraces and thus retain the wonderful Victorian streetscapes. It all happened and much of that housing remains as public housing.

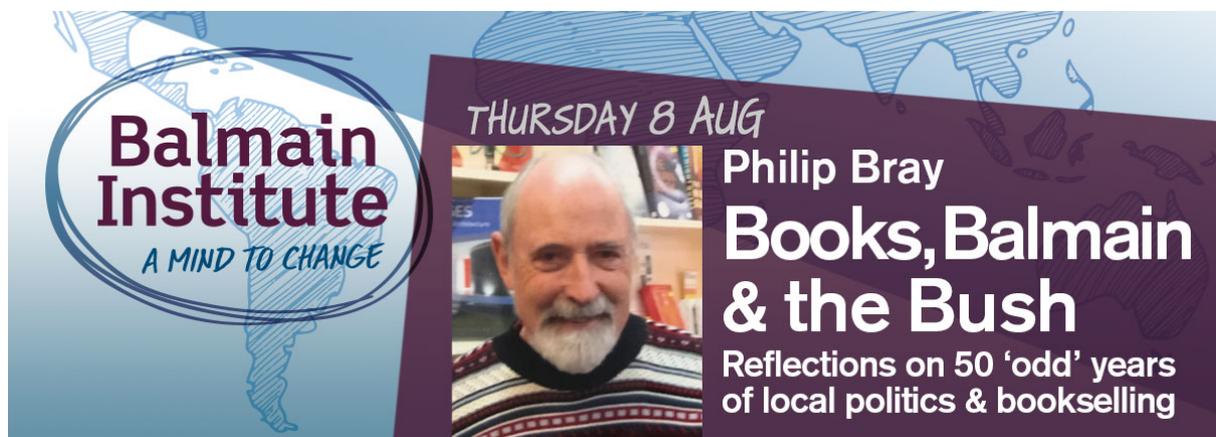
Council also approached Tom Uren on the matter of the Expressways/motorways planned to rip our municipality apart.

Over the previous 12 months we had already mounted a huge public campaign which had garnered widespread support in opposition to the State Governments plans. The State Government was definitely 'feeling the heat' and had begun to waver on the issue. The State Government also wanted Federal Government money to help with the project. After our submissions to Tom and his Department no Federal monies were made available and the project was dropped. Glebe, Annandale and Rozelle were saved.

During my time on Council I was also a member of the Local Government Association's Pre-school Education and Child Care Committee and was a founding member of the Local Government Study Group. This group organised seminars which were attended by aldermen from around the State, wrote submissions to enquiries and campaigned on various issues affecting Local Government.

It was wonderful to have enough like-minded colleagues, so much community support and to be in the right place at the right time to achieve a great deal. It was exhausting, exciting and ultimately rewarding. I am very glad that I read Young, Willmott and Jane Jacobs.

In 1984 Margaret and I were part of the 600 strong syndicate which bought and saved the property which houses The Belvoir Street Theatre and that has been such a vibrant part of



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Sydney's cultural life since that time. That perhaps reflects my early thoughts of a career in theatre.

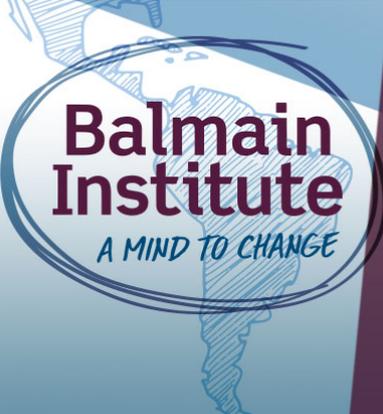
I think it is time I got back to books and bookselling.

Both bookselling and our sister industry publishing have seen enormous changes in the last 50 years. Before reflecting on those changes let me note that what has not changed is people's love of a good story and that the traditional book remains a near perfect tactile package.

As elsewhere technology has had huge impacts. In 1969 bookselling and publishing were quaint, read largely inefficient, cottage industries. At the counter our essential tools were pencil, paper, a cash drawer, and a good memory. Today we have tap and go card transactions, integrated point-of-sale/stock control systems and massive databases of information enabling good booksellers to give immensely better service to our customers. In 1969 100% of our transactions were cash and we needed good mental arithmetic to calculate change. Today 83% of transactions are with cards. It is hard to believe now that in its time the humble fax machine was a technological miracle.

Revolutions in printing have in turn revolutionised books. Colour plates used to be an expensive luxury. Now magnificently illustrated books on food, art, architecture, gardening and design are the norm and are available at a fraction of the price they would have been. Much smaller print runs are now viable so books which could not then be published economically now can be. Many titles are now available 'on demand' meaning a single copy of an 'out of print' title can be ordered at no extra cost.

The colour printing revolution has also dramatically changed children's picture books and Australian publishers have led the world in this field. Children's novels can now be printed with many illustrations and with different colour text making them more appealing. In 1969 teenage/young adult novels did not exist as a genre. Today there is a huge and wonderful range available. These changes have contributed to a big increase in sales of children's and teenage books which persuades me that the 'death of the book' which so many have prophesied for so long is not just exaggerated but entirely wrong.



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Gender imbalance was sadly endemic in Australian and international society in 1969 and the book industries were not exempt. Bookshop managers, publishing executives, publisher's sales representatives and authors were predominately male. While Jane Austen, Agatha Christie and Enid Blyton were not the only women authors available in 1969 there are now vastly more women published in every genre. To see women on, and sometimes dominating, best-seller lists and literary awards is now happily commonplace. In publishing many of the top positions are now held by women and I'm delighted to say their numbers include my daughter Elizabeth who is Managing Director of Bloomsbury Publishing Australia! Elizabeth started work as a 'Saturday morning girl' at Brays.

Many of the changes in bookselling and publishing have been worldwide.

Two changes however have been of particular importance to our nation and our society.

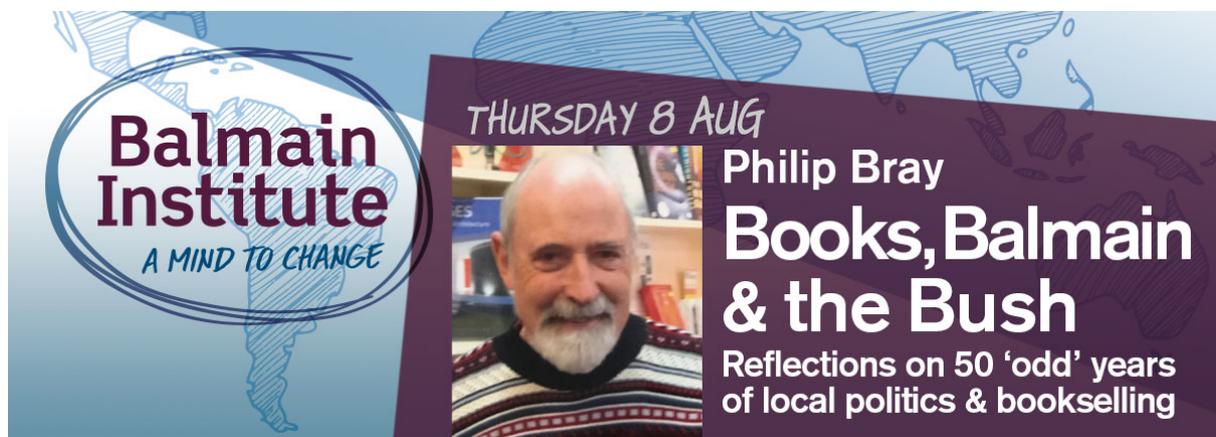
One is the strength and appreciation of independent bookshops. Australia has a much higher percentage of independent book shops than either the U.K. or the U.S.A. As a consequence smaller publishers and lesser known authors get better support resulting in a wider range of publishing and a wider range of books on the shelves. A contributing factor to this situation was my having a hissey fit and having it at just the right time.

In the 1970's and early 1980's independent book shops were in the main not highly regarded by publishers nor by the general public. We were look down upon as quaint little aberrations. Whilst there was some truth in that it was galling to me that publishers treated department stores and chains with more respect and gave them much better trading terms. Similarly the general public saw independents as a secondary and inferior source of books. Of course there were some people in publishing and some members of the public, some of whom are here tonight, who were more enlightened but those were the predominant attitudes and they really rankled me.

Whose fault was it? In part it was down to the quaint little aberrations who had not done enough to raise their profiles.

The answer I thought was to create a group of cooperating independents.

Is this beginning to sound like the story of my life?



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The idea was that such a group could advertise together and hence raise their profile with the public and with publishers and at the same time promote worthy books which were being relatively ignored.

I toured Sydney visiting independent bookshops incognito and sought advice from some of the enlightened publishers to assess which shops should be approached with the idea. I had already costed the idea which involved advertising, with publisher support, in The Sydney Morning, The National Times and the Sun-Herald.

So it was that The Sydney Independent Bookshops Group was formed in 1978 with 7 members.

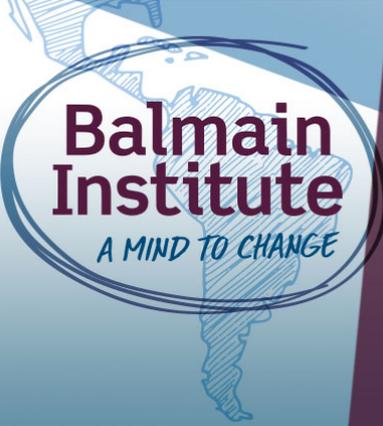
I mentioned that my hissey fit came at just the right time. It was the time when computers were starting to provide lots of good financial analysis. So when I approached publishers with the idea that they should come up with some money to support the advertising campaign they went to their computers and came up with some results which surprised them. For a start when you combined the sales of those funny little aberrations it came to a considerable figure. Even more surprising was the realisation that they, the publishers, actually made a reasonable profit from dealing with the independents. This was in contrast to their bottom line with the department stores to which they had been giving such generous trading terms.

The campaign was successful. Publishers started give Independent Booksellers more consideration and the 7 booksellers began to meet and have dinner together every month to share their knowledge and experience. No longer were we individual small businesses 'battling alone against the world'.

When I analysed the results of the advertising campaign it was clear that the best results came from The National Times. Hmmm how much more cost-effective it would be if there was a similar group of bookshops in Victoria?

I repeated the Sydney process with 3 trips to Melbourne and Geelong and as a result the Victorian Independent Booksellers Group of 9 shops was formed in 1979. This gave me one of the highlights of my life - a magical evening.

Having 'sold' the concept to the 9 shops I arranged a dinner get-together. Surprisingly only 2 of them had ever met before that night. I introduced them to each other.... and barely had to utter a word thereafter. They quickly discovered that they 'were not alone in the big



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commercial world', that they 'shared the same hopes and attitudes', that they 'all had the same problems'. They literally sparked off each other. It was magical. They also went on to meet every month sharing their knowledge and supporting each other.

Both groups were in constant contact with publishers and to this day the particular strengths of independent bookshops are well appreciated by publishers in Australia and there is mutual support.

The second change of particular importance to our society over the last 5 decades is the huge growth in Australian writing and publishing. Imagine an Australian bookshop without books by Tim Winton, Peter Carey, Kate Grenville, Richard Flanagan, David Malouf, Jane Harper, Michelle de Kretzer and so many other Australian fiction writers on the shelves. They are Australian authors telling Australian stories! Similarly on the non-fiction shelves important stories and critiques of our history and society abound. Importantly they include stories of aboriginal and recent migrant experiences. We would be so much the poorer as a society without these stories.

There is an old saying, 'may you live in interesting times'. I certainly have and my fifty years as a bookseller in Balmain have been profoundly rewarding. To have been an important part in the life of so many people and so many families has been a great privilege and an equal pleasure.

I often said, 'It's either Balmain or the Bush for me'. Well I will not become a stranger to Balmain but I will be spending more time at my house in Moss Vale so it turns out it will be 'Balmain and the Bush'.

Finally, of course I must finish with a quote from a book – it's from Winnie the Pooh.

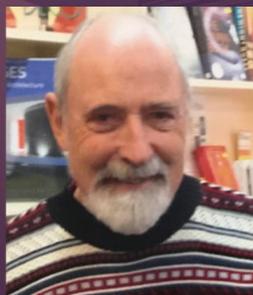
'What day is it?', asked Pooh. 'It's today', squeaked Piglet. 'My favourite day', said Pooh.

It my fervent hope that we may all have many more favourite days. Thank you.

**Balmain
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A MIND TO CHANGE

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