



Book review

Bellanta, Melissa (2012) *Larrikins: A History*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press.

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This book has been painstakingly researched by a scholar whose intellectual competencies span several disciplines: history, sociology, criminology, culture, drama and film studies. It is theoretically sophisticated and yet not dense as it reads like a novel with an abundance of interesting complex characters. The central character is the larrikin but not the one Bellanta describes as ‘the true blue Aussie larrikin’, the beer swelling, mischief making, fun-loving, anti-authoritarian, raunchy hyper-masculine male who calls a penis ‘a donger’; an erection, ‘cracking the fat’; sex, ‘sinking the sausage’; and vomit, ‘a technicolour yawn’ (Bellanta 2012: 185). Nor is the central larrikin character for this book the iconic – the free love, dope smoking, rock ‘n’ rolling, counterculture hippy-type bourgeois revolutionaries of the 1950s and 1960s who were especially linked with the Sydney Push or the Melbourne Drift (p. 184).

While Bellanta points out that larrikinism is often invoked to symbolise the Aussie spirit of ‘the diggers’ and to excuse the ‘hooliganish behaviour among AIF men during and after war’ (Bellanta 2012: 178), this book is not predominantly about this legend either. Nor is the book’s principal larrikin figure territorial as characterised by thuggish hyper-masculine inner-city urban fans, gangs, mobs or pushes that over-compensated for their working class lot in life by over-identifying with their local footy team and taking vengeance against rivals with knuckle dusters and ‘rocks and chains’ (p. 154). Another typical larrikin type, Melissa Bellanta also reminds us, had great fun disrupting Labor Day picnics at Chowder Bay and other working class celebrations. ‘Like it or not, the first larrikins efforts have echoes in the leary confidence and hedonistic display in youth cultures today’ (p. 29).

The real-life historical larrikins whose biographies provide copy for much of this book were the first and second generation youths born of ex-convicts and new immigrants during the long boom between 1860 and 1890 (Bellanta 2012: 8). They include characters such as James Rorty Grey, who hung out with the bummer gang at Sydney’s notorious Paddy’s Markets (p. 21) and frequented music halls and dance saloons; William Porky Finn and Harold Dodger Smith (p. 151), convicted for manslaughter in 1919 after a territorial skirmish between pushes in post-war Melbourne; and George Howard, a thief who worked for a Brisbane boot factory in 1880s. These historical figures were ‘rough youth’, two-penny capitalists and costermongers inspired by 19th century culture, music and theatre such as the *Leary Bloke* (and in the 20th century *The Sentimental Bloke*). Melissa Bellanta has a talent for seamlessly integrating historical detail about theatre, music, poetry and dance as a way of foregrounding ‘the role of culture in the rise of larrikins’ (Bellanta 2012: 27). For, as she reminds us, ‘larrikinism was itself a cultural

phenomenon, manifested through flamboyant dress, a self promotional demeanour, a love of cheap amusements, and 'villainous' songbooks (p. 28).

Larrikinism is an ambiguous term of denigration for some and endearment for others. The term larrikin is not even Australian. It is a derivative of the English expression 'to lark about' or 'to act leary'. Larrikin first appeared in print in Australia in 1870 to describe youngsters belonging to the 'rowdy class' who were locked up after a Saturday night of drinking, fighting and thieving in inner city Melbourne (Bellanta 2012: 3). The larrikin was soon thereafter hailed as an 'obnoxious new breed' (p. 4) residing in identifiable belts of the rapidly growing metropolis of Sydney in the 1880s and in Brisbane by the 1890s. Larrikinism was used to distinguish the youth of the respectable from the unrespectable labouring classes of the colony, just as the term 'bogan' might be used today.

The author's interpretation might shock some, especially those hell bent on romanticising the distinctly Australian rebellious streak of larrikin men, but not all larrikins were male. Melissa Bellanta's original historical research has finally uncovered what many female scholars, including myself, have always suspected hidden – that the young women of the colonies were not just 'gimme girls', 'brazen huzzies' or 'donahs' prepared to put up with any amount of abuse, violence and disrespect. 'Colonial larrikin girls were every bit as showy and vulgarly confident as the boys' (p. 32). Influenced by the style and culture of burlesque female performances, they were not 'just a root', or passive object of sexual gratification but 'worked up their own sense of same sex solidarity; their own friendships, animosities and rivalries' (p. 46) 'to compensate for the easy brutality of boys and contempt of colonial society at large' (p. 46).

This book confronts the reader with indisputable evidence that larrikins should not simply be romanticised. Most confronting is the chapter on the Mount Rennie outrage, about the gang rape of Mary Jane Hicks, an orphan from Bathurst. Initially 16 boys were investigated; 11 were put on trial, and nine convicted and sentenced to hang although, after successful requests to the governor for clemency, only four did. The case has been a *cause célèbre* ever since (p. 89). No doubt this case entailed elements of rough justice, with some of the boys unfairly prosecuted for merely being associates of the Waterloo push; and many, including myself, would never defend the use of the death penalty for any crime, including rape. Looking back, what's so remarkable is that any of these young men were prosecuted at all. By my reckoning, having studied similar cases of rape and murder in more contemporary times (Carrington 1998), impunity would have been a more likely outcome for these lads if they'd been born a century later,

Larrikins were also convicted for homophobic- and racist-motivated crimes of violence, revenge and hatred. Even though there was proximity between the social networks and cultural spaces of inner city pushes and underground male homosexual circles: the frequenting of disused buildings and toilet blocks; the sharing of boarding houses and prison cells; and the similar situations and conditions experienced by servicemen during war (Bellanta 2012: 162). On the historical evidence amassed by Bellanta, it seems gay men were among the favoured objects of larrikin homophobia. Immigrant Chinese settlers of the gold rushes were also chosen victims of attack. Bellanta reminds us it's a bit like the Cronulla riot participants of 2005 driving around in cars with bumper stickers - 'fuck off, we're full'.

There is so much to commend this book that I would nominate Melissa Bellanta for a Queensland literary award – except that these have been extinguished by the recently elected cultural Philistines in the Queensland government. Give me a larrikin in government any day. Where's Paul Keating?

References

Carrington K (1998) *Who Killed Leigh Leigh?* Sydney: Random House.