

The Gayndah Communes: From Aborigines and Squatters through Communes to Rural Depopulation in the Gayndah Area.

BILL METCALF

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The Gayndah Communes tells the story of three short-lived, 1890s communes in Queensland, Australia. Sponsored by a liberal government, these neighboring socialist experiments were sabotaged by its conservative successor. Author Bill Metcalf lets his subjects speak for themselves while allowing their lives to carry the story line, framing their experiences within the classic drama of alternative living in a hostile environment.

Metcalf sets the stage by reviewing utopian and communal impulses in 19th century Australia, Queensland's brief program of cooperative settlements, and the scenic, sparsely populated area around the town of Gayndah. He then examines Byrnestown, Resolute, and Bon Accord communities, first during their brief (1893-95) communal phase, then in their development of private farming and rural culture. He concludes by asking why the Gayndah communes failed but most of their members stayed on to build communities that thrived for decades. His account is based on extensive interviews with descendants as well as rich archival and journalistic records.

Frankly sympathetic with the utopian aspirations of the 520 communal pioneers, Metcalf's narrative and photographs make palpable the communards' hopes, hunger, struggle against the elements, and increasing desperation. We suffer at the death of three-month-old Margaret Mathews; marvel at the persistence of carpenter Harry Head, who built many of the communities' structures; and grimace at the incompetence and perfidy of government officials who betrayed the trust of these mostly immigrant families.

The author's nostalgia for the communal cause may account for both the wistful charm of his tale and the absence of comparison of the Gayndah communes' fate with that of other intentional communities. The book makes no reference to the work of sympathetic communal scholars like Hostetler and Huntington, on the Hutterites; Oved and Yassour, on Israeli kibbutzim; Kanter, on commitment mechanisms; Pitzer, on developmental communalism; or Erasmus, on reciprocal altruism.

By Metcalf's reckoning, the Gayndah communes might have succeeded if not for a hostile government, bad weather, and poor land. But his own reports suggest a more complex picture. "You cannot unite a lot of men who differ fundamentally," warns agronomist Edward Shelton (12). These communards lacked the unifying religious bond of North America's long-lived Hutterite communities. Moreover, studies of rural communes show that members' lack of "any practical experience of rough rural life" (95) typically outweighs their zeal for common ownership in predicting communal failure.

While neighboring private farmers flourished in spite of bad weather and marginal land, the communal farms foundered and "members' small private gardens, in fact, provided much of their food" (102). It was only "while working as individual farmers" that the ex-communards "developed a solid community" (115). Residents' outside work cutting sugarcane became less problematical when, unlike their communal predecessors, they were "able to retain what they earned" (117).

After privatization, the formerly conflict-ridden Byrnestown communards "seemed to get along reasonably well as neighbors" (129). The cruel and self-serving hypocrisy of Queensland officials toward the communes does not entirely invalidate the Secretary of Lands' critique of collective farming as "laying the axe at the root of all human incentive" (203). Indeed, as political anthropologist James Scott has noted, small-scale private farmers have typically outperformed larger-scale corporate and collective farms. In assessing the Gayndah communal failures, Metcalf avoids confronting Aristotle's classic argument that people take better care of things they own, or the Greek's criticism of the "watery sort of fraternity" advocated by his communistic mentor, Plato.

Scholars have shown that communal ownership with egalitarian politics—the socialist utopia—can thrive as long as communities remain small, residents share basic values sheltered from outside corruption, and face-to-face relationships continually reinforce trust among neighbors. Otherwise, the liberating—and disintegrating—lure of the market will either doom or transform communal societies. Thus, “that elusive Victorian notion of human nature” (205), the third of Metcalf’s “five possible explanations” (207) for the failure of the Gayndah communes, may deserve more attention than he gives it.

MICHAEL S. CUMMINGS
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