Wicked Flats

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Seamus O’Hanlon

TOGETHER APART: BOARDING HOUSE, HOSTEL AND FLAT LIFE IN PRE-WAR MELBOURNE

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MELBOURNE HISTORIAN Seamus O’Hanlon has, in his first book, added an extra dimension to the study of Australian urban society. This element is every bit as important as the late realisation amongst Australia’s historians that we have long been a nation of city dwellers. It’s hard now to appreciate that it wasn’t until the late 1960s and publications such as Michael Cannon’s Land Boomers (1967) — whose success was surely in part due to the beginnings of the middle-class exodus ‘back’ to the nineteenth-century housing stock of the inner city — that Anglo-Australians began to celebrate their cities, ports and industrial heritage. The detached houses and cottages of the Victorian era, and the former ‘slum’ areas of the ‘walking city’, were redeemed both as suitable for serious study, and as serious real estate.

Following from this, and via historians as diverse as Weston Bate and Graeme Davison, the formerly reviled suburbs have come to be celebrated. By the 1980s, and with the urging of commentators such as Hugh Stretton and artists such as Howard Arkley, the middle-ring suburbs of the large cities of Australia — for so long, à la David Meredith, reviled as the graveyard of creativity — found themselves relocated lock, stock and barrel as Australia’s heartland.

To his credit, O’Hanlon has discovered an extra dimension to the world of boarding houses, hostels, flats and other group housing arrangements that few of us have ever considered in an Australian context: urban, but not suburban. As O’Hanlon himself notes, the Kennett government in Victoria promoted a denser inner city in terms suggesting that a ‘European’ lifestyle of apartment living was a sophisticated innovation in a city like Melbourne. Indeed, so novel is O’Hanlon’s exploration of flat life that even Patrick Troy’s wonderful edited collection A History of European Housing in Australia (2000) does not mention apartments or boarding houses at all, though fifty years ago one-eighth of Australia’s population were living in them. Like earlier social commentators and historians, we have all seen the apartment buildings of, say, East Melbourne and Kings Cross/Edgecliff in Sydney, not to mention the converted mansions of St Kilda and grand early housing projects such as Ways Terrace at Pyrmont. Some are sumptuous, some are shabby, but what kind of lives have been played out in such structures? Were the inhabitants of Melbourne Mansions of Collins Street, Melbourne, antipathetic to suburbia, striking out a bold new way of life, only to be followed in earnest by the mainstream seventy years later in the new apartments and warehouse conversions of Australia’s CBDs? Was this the heart of bohemian Australia in the first half of the twentieth century? Was this where the gays, and other socially marginalised Melburnians, found themselves best able to lead a satisfactorily private life? Were the flats and boarding houses just transient locales for people hoping for better? Did these people really want to live in apartments — or were they all but homeless? Yes, all of the above. These people ranged from the very rich to the very poor; they were inner-city dwellers, in high-density, often highly social, situations, and their circumstances form an integral part of early twentieth-century history.

Like the authors of many such studies (at least the best of them), O’Hanlon allows his micro-examination to shine light on all kinds of lives: those we already know about (Hal Porter at the George Hotel, in St Kilda) and those that don’t fit with the way we see Australian cities in the 1920s and 1930s, such as the exploits of the young white Australian girls in 1928 caught sleeping with members of Sonny Clay’s Colored Idea, a black jazz band, publicised as part of the Truth’s campaign against the immorality inherent in ‘flat life’. He also explores questions of ownership, maintenance and aesthetics in the Australian flat. While the diversity he finds there does not lead to any satisfyingly clear conclusions, this in itself is an intriguing aspect to Australian flat culture.

Together Apart is a converted PhD thesis, a fact only obvious from O’Hanlon’s frequent citing of other historians, and his eagerness to keep his methodology transparent. His writing style is engaging and his subject fascinating, with only a few scant confusing elements (in what sense, for instance, is The Rocks ‘across the water’ from ‘Sydney proper’?). The ‘secret history’ is certainly a passé, not to mention contradictory, concept, but O’Hanlon has built on its central premise to create a fascinating portrait of early twentieth-century urban Melbourne at both ends of the social scale. This is a history of private lives, of lives behind thin walls, between nosy parker neighbours.