

14. The Society Reborn

In Sydney on the 8th April 1948 at a local meeting of the World League for the Protection of Animals a speech was given by Liberal Catholic Bishop Sten von Krusenstierna entitled, *The Humane Aspect of Vegetarianism*. After the talk those in attendance decided to form what was in their view the first Australian Vegetarian Society. The members of this reincarnated Society were apparently ignorant of their Australian antecedents, as it was not until 1949 that an unnamed female member from Victoria rectified this error by writing in to the *Australian Vegetarian* stating that a Mrs Harvey (sic) had 50 years earlier founded an earlier Vegetarian Society in Melbourne.

The new Society held its first meeting on the 20th May to formulate its aims, constitution and to conduct an election of office holders.

The aims of the Society decided upon were:

To spread the principles and advantages of vegetarianism and the ideal of a humanitarian mode of life

To advocate, extend and organise Vegetarianism in Australia and to form branches and groups in any part of the country

To encourage co-operation between vegetarians throughout the world

To organise public meetings, lectures and discussions; to establish libraries, and to publish and distribute literature and a periodical magazine

To facilitate the supply of vegetarian food.

The office holders elected were; President - William Edgar Roberts, a naturopath and the principal of the Sydney School of Naturopathy and the W.E. Roberts Health Institute all based at his premises at 17A Pitt Street, Sydney, which was also where the first meetings of the Society were held. The other positions were; Vice Presidents - John Boyd Steel (then a vegetarian for over 40 years and the Deputy President of the World League for the Protection of Animals) and

- D. K. Otton a dietician. Sten von Krusenstierna, became Honorary Secretary and editor of their incipient publication, *The Australian Vegetarian*. The new Society therefore at its outset had leaders who represented the three major strands of vegetarianism; the religious, the health conscious and the animal concerned.

This spread of vegetarian interests unfortunately did not last, with the Society becoming almost entirely made up of naturopaths and other alternative health practitioners within a two year period.

The new Society quickly developed branches in a number of states:

The Brisbane branch was founded on the 7th March 1949 with 14 members. The Vice-President was the naturopath Frederick Roberts, who lent one of his premises for the branch meetings.

The Perth branch was founded on the 21st December 1949 with 20 members

The Adelaide branch was founded on the 6th June 1950 with 32 members; the President was the naturopath Madame Mira Louise

A branch was also started in 1950 in Melbourne. There were a number of vegetarians in Melbourne, and a contact group had been formed, but the branch was not started until revelations in a local newspaper about cruelty in the meat industry caused one to be founded, so that a group could respond to this gift of publicity. Mary E Foley, formed the new branch with an initial membership of three, but after 3 months of keeping the arguments for vegetarianism in the media she recorded that this figure had grown to 50. Foley was very successful in raising public awareness and developed a good relationship with the media, she also served as an editor of the *Australian Vegetarian* and from 1948 to 1972 of the vegetarian journal *Health and Vision*.

Newcastle formed a group in 1949, rather than a branch, and does not appear to have conducted meetings as such.

Quite soon after the state branches were established, it became clear that all of them were in some way involved in naturopathy. All of the branches met in the offices of naturopaths, and most of the elected officers were naturopaths or other alternative health practitioners. Given this, the promotion of the diet thence forward was almost always diluted in favour of the promotion of some other health remedy. In this way the Society became inexorably linked to the promotion of all and every alternative medical belief. The journals of the Society, including the *Vegetarian Monthly*, similarly gave themselves totally over to health issues. This was particularly apparent under the editorship of Mira Louise from 1959 onwards.

In 1962 a vegetarian writing to resign from the Vegetarian Society put the case thus:

“I have been a vegetarian from birth - that is more than 50 years - and I always regret to see such a simple thing as a vegetarian diet made into a food fad, which makes us appear as ‘cranks’ to anyone else. After all, millions of Indians have lived that way for generations without any fuss. On top of the food-faddism I note that our Society now also associates itself entirely with some form of naturopathy which borders on quackery. I consider it most irresponsible (and rather childish) to advocate ‘cures’ for such dangerous diseases as poliomyelitis and cancer, and many loosely described ills, which if not properly diagnosed by a qualified medical practitioner might easily be wrongly treated. I think the name of the magazine is at present a misnomer. With the exception of your recipes, which I appreciate, there is nothing of vegetarianism in the magazine. I cannot perceive WHAT fluoridation of water has to do with the abstinence of meat! The Society would do a better service to its members if it would obtain information on which packaged and tinned foods manufactured in Australia are guaranteed free from dead animal matter, or press for a legislation which makes it compulsory for manufacturers to state exact contents as is law in many countries. Which medicines are ‘pure’ and which are derived from animal matter or the suffering of animals, etc. After all I am more concerned about the suffering of animals than in the fact whether I will live longer (or not) by abstaining from flesh food.”¹

The schism between vegans and vegetarians that took place in 1944 in the United Kingdom, did not affect Australia, as there was no Society at that time to split. This division came about due to the non-defining of vegetarian. Most vegetarians considered themselves vegetarian if they abstained from eating meat, but not from animal products such as milk and eggs.

In the 1970s, an alternative to the Vegetarian Societies for those who had adopted the diet solely for ethical reasons emerged in the form of vegan and Animal Liberation organisations, wherein animals - their rights and welfare - were the pre-eminent issue. The first Australian vegan organisation - The Vegan Society of Victoria - was founded on the 3rd August 1973 with three members. By 1977 with the growth in interest, caused in part by the work of Peter Singer, the Vegan Society had grown to become a national organisation.

After their founding the five original Vegetarian Society branches in Australia had over the years widely fluctuating memberships and all had periods of inactivity, some of which lasted for many years. From the 1980s they began to widened their membership base and in many cases linked directly with Vegan Societies, as they had grown to have essentially the same animal centred aims

¹ Letter from unnamed member in Vegetarian Monthly, Vegetarian Society of Australia, Sydney, Vol.2 no. 4, Aug. 1962, p.7

– though also it must be said, the Vegan Societies had now also come to share the wider alternative health concerns.

There do not appear to have ever been branches in Tasmania or the Northern Territory, and a Vegetarian Society branch did not appear in Canberra (in the Australian Capital Territory) until early 1994, although this was partly because prior to then those interested were happy to be included in the New South Wales branch membership.

The first vegetarians to have visited Canberra - Australia's capital city - were probably Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in 1913, who had won the international competition to design the new city.

Undoubtedly the largest gathering of vegetarians in Canberra occurred over 5 days in mid December 1976 when the Cotter Reserve hosted the first Down to Earth Confest. The event was instigated by Dr Jim Cairns, who was then a backbench MP, but had until Gough Whitlam's dismissal been Deputy Prime Minister. Cairns rallied alternative groups, including vegetarian and vegan organisations, from around Australia to the event and sought the help of the members of Alternative Canberra, a commune in Pialligo, to organise the event. The event drew between 10-15,000 people many of which were vegetarian and all of which would have been exposed to vegetarianism during the event.

Attending this alternative festival were vegetarians from various religious groupings; Hare Krishna, Ananda Marga, the Scottish Findhorn Community and from the Vegan Society.