

18. Concluding Remarks

One of the reasons for the growth in vegetarianism, and why it took off in Melbourne and surrounding Victoria in the late 1880s, can be traced back to the Gold Rushes of the 1850s. The same people who were prepared to travel across the world seeking fortunes in foreign lands, where also the adventurous type who were prepared to try new diets, religions and lifestyles. This tendency has been noted in the make-up of San Francisco society which was also partially built by Gold Rushers, and remains a radical and libertarian city. Even those who came to Melbourne after the Gold Rushes had diminished, were still presumably those looking for the space to create a new life outside of the settled social strictures of Europe. Melbourne certainly at least until 1900 was a city adept at catering to alternative lifestyles.

The wave of vegetarianism in Australia during the 1880s and 1890s can also be seen as the result of a wider spiritual malaise taking place throughout the developed world in response to the sweeping changes of modernism. Many of the prominent Australian vegetarians that have been mentioned were in revolt against the urbanised, mechanised, atheistic society that was being created in Australia and elsewhere from 1840s onwards. Modern science - which disproved and ridiculed the spiritual world - was studiously ignored, while, in medicine, many vegetarians rejected new drugs and therapies in favour of the use of traditional herbal remedies and homoeopathy. They campaigned vociferously against new treatments such as vaccination, a medical procedure that many vegetarians are still opposed to today. In religion they promoted a return to a fundamental and temperate spiritualism, whether Christian or Eastern, that rejected materialism and the growth in secularism.

The perceived growth in materialism, individuality and vice was seen as a direct result of urban living. It was this view that spurred men like David Andrade and William Terry to form agrarian communes, or like by John Newton Wood to move to temperate planned colonies. In these communities, they believed that people could live in greater sympathy with nature. Vegetarianism and raw food diets were supported as part of this general worldview because they were simpler, less cruel and challenged the animal industries that had turned living creatures into commodities.

But not all historical vegetarians were motivated by temperance or religion. Many were intemperate, urbanised and rationalist - very much the precursors of the majority of modern day vegetarians.

Much of this brief history of Australian vegetarianism has relied on available historical and published records and has only attempted to show a basic history of the complex subject of the diet in Australia. Many of the vegetarians mentioned came to prominence through their works or through their connection with other organisations or religions. Many, such as Chidley, had individual philosophies concerning vegetarianism. Yet others, such as Ellen White, had religious motivations of which vegetarianism played just a part. These were atypical vegetarians. The vast majority of Australian vegetarians carried on their lives without publicity, the only difference between them and their neighbours being their diet. We cannot know for sure how many there were, all we can say is that the ongoing sales of vegetarian recipe books, the growth in vegetarian food products and health food stores testify that they existed in every period of Australia's past.

As is the case now, only a small fraction of the hundreds of thousands of Australian vegetarians are active members of animal welfare or vegetarian organisations. With so many different route causes for people taking up the diet it is not surprising that a cohesive movement has been difficult to sustain. In the past, that vegetarianism was rarely promoted for the single purpose of saving animals lives - rather than for a myriad of other reasons - may have been responsible for diluting the message and the consequent loss of potential converts. Claims by health advocates that eating meat brought about dread diseases such as tuberculosis and cancers (though this was often the case), or the temperance and religious view that it caused spiritual atrophy and social delinquency, never really seemed to coalesce with the public's perception.

However, in the years after 1948 when the current Vegetarian Society was founded, vegetarianism has nevertheless slowly made some headway in Australia with many more notable Australian vegetarians giving the diet some exposure.

The Society and its state branches up until the 1970s had several periods of prolonged inactivity, and there was even a period when the only Vegetarian Society journal was produced by a few dedicated activists in South Australia. On the international stage as well Australia was not active within the International Vegetarian Union until 1963, but since then there have been delegates at most Congresses.

The past failure of vegetarian societies to grow and spread may have been more a result of the beliefs and actions of the Societies' members and leadership than of an unthinking meat-loving society since many were also involved in other anti-social 'crankish' pursuits. The Theosophists for example, greatly supported vegetarianism, but they were part of a somewhat esoteric religious organisation. A typical response to vegetarians comes from a Sydney author writing in 1905, who stated:

“Vegetarians make me feel unhappy. Besides that they have nearly always got some other craze. They are Trinitarians, or Milleniarists, or Atheists, or Baptists, or Dentists, or something peculiar”.¹

The health food and natural medicine exponents from 1920s, although promoting a vegetarian diet, often did not use the word vegetarian in their publications for fear of being detrimentally associated with the movement. Conversely, however the health food community, raw foodists, anti-vaccinationists, naturopaths, and nature curists who did promote the diet, may also have unwittingly limited the growth of the vegetarian movement.

Whilst there were factors, which may have made the vegetarian movement unattractive to some, it should not be ignored that there was also a great deal of misinformation, propaganda and adverse advertising directed against the diet. The cattle barons, stockmen, pastoralists, graziers, animal transporters, abattoir owners and their workers and in turn their unions, as well as the neighbourhood butchers all had a vested interest in slaughter and so were prepared to use their political and economic clout to affect government policy and also to fund pro-meat advertising campaigns. The political make-up of Australia which gives undue prominence to relatively small constituencies of people in rural areas (and thus minority political parties such as the Country and National Parties) also protects the uneconomic and unprincipled animal industries. All British colonial administrations, and later Australian federal and state governments, have since Australia's inception directly or indirectly subsidised and promoted the meat and dairy industries using vast sums of taxpayer's money, a policy which continues unabated to this day. To promote meat production and consumption Australian taxpayers and meat and livestock producers have created and funded over the years an array of bodies including, to name a few, the Australian Meat Board, Australian Meat Council, Meat and Livestock Commission, Meat & Livestock Australia, the Australian Meat Industry Council, the Meat Research Corporation, various Meat Advisory Boards, Meat Industry Authorities, Beef Associations, the Australian Lamb, Sheepmeat, and Cattle Councils, the Red Meat Advisory Council, the Australian Livestock Exporters' Council, the Meat Research Committee, the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation and more recently the various Cooperative Research Centres for Beef, Pork, Cattle etc. Whilst other government bodies such as the CSIRO have become so compromised by their involvement in the animal industries that they are seen by many vegetarians and others as little more than scientific touts for the meat and dairy industry. This view was given particular emphasis by the production in 2005 of the CSIRO diet book (and later follow ons), which

¹ Gossip (Robert McMillan), *No breakfast, or, The secret of life*, Sydney, William Brooks & Co., 1905, p.13

contrary to most advanced thought, promoted the frequent eating of meat for health. Whilst this book was both laughable and abhorrent to vegetarians, it was still unfortunately a best-seller in Australia.

In 1942, the Commonwealth Government's Advisory Council on Nutrition advised that Australians have a meatless day once a week, but this advice was a rare exception – and was concerned more with rationing than with health. In more recent years there have been public awareness campaigns to attempt to increase the intake of fruits and vegetables by the general population (the latest advising consuming 5 vegetable and 2 fruit serves a day). These attempts have on the whole not been terribly effective, particularly when balanced against the saturation television advertising produced by the various meat lobbies. Australians continue to have a poor diet and, on the whole, Australian dietitians, public health officials and the medical community rather than educating the public about the benefits of a healthy vegetarian diet have placidly allowed Australians to become world leaders in meat eating obesity.

Government and their animal welfare officials have also long looked aside as the most glaring animal abuses have been perpetrated. Australia may have been an early adopter of animal welfare laws for the protection of pet and working animals such as horses, cats and dogs, but this legislation has done very little for those animals raised for meat or dairy production, and so the tortuous lives and deaths of these animals continues unabated. Native animals, such as kangaroos, are also liable to needless culling and feral animals, those animals imported to Australia which have now become unwanted or too successful, are almost completely unprotected.

Hope for the future

For those who adopt the diet on health grounds, a better understanding of nutrition and the now scientifically verified health risks involved in eating meat (notwithstanding the added hormones, steroids and antibiotics), means that the number of Vegetarians and Vegans seem set to continue to rise.

Given this growth in interest in a healthy diet and consequently vegetarianism, all Australian capital cities now have a good number of health food stores, and there are hundreds more spread across the nation. It is unlikely that there is a single town in Australia without a health food store offering vegetarian food alternatives to meat.

The growth of the Internet has seen a rapid expansion of vegetarian resources, communication and opportunities for campaigning. It has also allowed for the rapid internationalisation of campaigning – particularly in the case of successful mass organisations such as the US-based PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) which has brought a new dynamism and strength to animal rights and welfare issues as well as vegetarianism. Mulesing – the practice of cutting sections of sheep’s behinds without anaesthetic to prevent fly strike - has been an issue with Australian animal groups for many years, yet it took PETA only a short time to galvanise support and international boycotts to force farm groups to find alternatives.

In the past young people had few role models who were vegetarian, and those few available were not exactly trendy. Today there are numerous pop stars, actors and media personalities that they can relate to and emulate. The diet within a relatively short time, has gone from being perceived as a crankish fad, to being an accepted and ‘normal’ practice.

Unfortunately however, even with all the present awareness of the benefits of the diet and the examples of the many vegetarians who have promoted the diet over the last 200 years, it still may be some time before the typical Australian fare changes from the barbecue and the meat pie.