

## 9. Eccentric Reformers

Not all famous vegetarians were positive influences in promoting the diet. Some were just plain eccentrics, such as William Chidley (1860-1916). During the pre-WW1 period Chidley was undoubtedly Australia's most well-known vegetarian and was a familiar figure in Sydney's Domain where he could frequently be found proselytising his social theories to either amused or shocked audiences. To further spread his ideas, he wrote a book called *The Answer*, which went through a number of editions between 1911 and 1916. It expounded his opinions on the benefits of naturism, vegetarianism and sex reform. It was his sexual advice that got him into trouble. Essentially, he believed that man was going about the sex act in the wrong way, that the male erection was unhealthy and caused the brain to shrink. He believed in what he called 'natural coition' that would take place only in the spring, as it did with other animals, and where the dominant sexual player would be the female.

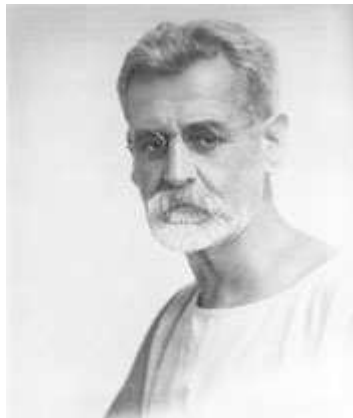
The authorities seized copies of Chidley's book and he was fined, imprisoned or confined to mental institutions on a number of occasions. He did have supporters, however. Henry Hyde Champion, owner of *The Champion* newspaper, helped publish his book and provided him with a lawyer. Meredith Atkinson, the British vegetarian, who was in Australia between 1914-1926 as a lecturer and promoter of the Workers Education Association movement, chaired a Chidley Defence Committee.

Seeing that Chidley was essentially a harmless crank, even some Sydney newspapers (including *The Bulletin*) ran campaigns for his freedom. Chidley's case eventually reached the NSW Parliament and subsequently led to his release, but Chidley could not stop himself for he was convinced that the ideas contained in his book could save the world. He says in the introduction to his last work:

"I give Australians this mission in the world: - Shepherd my Book! Oh! Shepherd my Book! Remember, it is the One hope for Humanity. Let those read it who want to; its truth will become apparent in time. The human race must return to (1) natural coition, (2) to nudity, and (3) to a

natural diet: fruit and nuts only; and each of these depend on the other two. Only thus can you obtain mutual Joy, Love, and Content.”<sup>1</sup>

Chidley continued to preach and sell his book in public, wearing a short white toga made out of semi-transparent material. The light toga was designed to let his skin breathe and to prevent sexual arousal which he thought was assisted by restrictive clothing. Chidley was finally re-admitted to Callan Park lunatic asylum where he died of an apparent heart attack.



Photograph courtesy of the Mitchell Library (State Library of NSW), Sydney

Although Chidley’s theories seem strange - even by today’s standards - he did have his followers. Some of them, including Harry S. Meatheringham, adopted his diet and dress and continued to sell his book after his death. He, too, was fined. Chidley’s anti-masculinist message also struck a chord with feminists of the day. Rose Scott, the feminist and society hostess, even arranged ladies only public meetings to hear his views.

While most exponents of vegetarianism adopted the diet through their own ethical or religious choices, Chidley was an exception because he was raised as one. His adoptive parents Maria and John Chidley had become vegetarians as followers of Swedenborg and spiritualism. They had emigrated from London around the 1850s, spent some time working in the goldfields and later moved to Melbourne where they ran a chain of toy shops. Maria Chidley, who had lost her only biological child, took to taking toys to children in orphanages, and then began adopting them -

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<sup>1</sup> Hornadge, Bill, *Chidley’s Answer to the Sex Problem*, Dubbo, N.S.W., Review publications, 1983, p. 11

five in all. Before they had adopted too many children, they had lived for a time in a vegetarian, Swedenborg-inspired communal house until scandal erupted. In his memoirs, Chidley reported his father's confession to him that "their relations became anything but 'spiritual', babies made their appearance - and there was scandal even worse than that".

Living in the commune were, among others, Claude Moody, who had emigrated from England in 1852 aged 23, and his future wife, Melissa Pitman. Melissa was the daughter of the leading Australian Swedenborgian, Jacob Pitman, and niece of Sir Isaac Pitman. Chidley spent much time with the Moodys on their property and often played with their son, Walter, while feasting on the fruits of their orchards.

After Chidley's death, John Shirlaw, a journalist of Scottish descent, and other 'Chidleans', started another vegetarian (and naturist) commune based on his teachings at Berry's Bay in Sydney.

Although Chidley was raised a vegetarian, as a rebellious youngster he lapsed in the diet for a time (much to his mother's distress), however he reported later: "I suffered by the change."<sup>2</sup>

Plagued as Chidley was by his own sexuality, he was not aided by the social *mores* of his time, nor by his disastrous long-term relationship with the failed actress, Ada Grantleigh. Grantleigh was epileptic, an alcoholic and frequently became sexually involved with other men. Chidley's own drinking problem would not have helped matters. From around 1884, to guard against his 'falls' (as he called his drinking and sexual episodes), he strived to live solely on a diet of fruit. He believed, as did so many temperance folk, that flesh-eating led to sensuality. His main dietary guide was a book by the German Gustav Schlickeysen entitled *Obst und Brot* (1875), which was translated into English by the American vegetarian Dr Martin Holroyd and published as *Fruit and Bread: a scientific diet* (1877).

Chidley found keeping to his restricted diet especially hard especially in regards to giving up smoking and drinking. In his autobiography, *The Confessions of William Chidley*, he recounts his battles to adhere to various diets. While Schlickeysen's diet was relatively wide-ranging, Chidley continually adopted more extreme diets but failed to keep to them. Throughout his life he seems to have had a particular penchant for choosing for himself the most difficult path.

Another (more 'successful') vegetarian and naturist with a very similar background to Chidley was the poet, librarian and academic, John Le Gay Brereton Junior. Like Chidley, Brereton's

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<sup>2</sup> Chidley, William, *The Confessions of William Chidley*, edited by S. McInerney, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1977 p.22

parents had emigrated from England, were Swedenborgians and also believed in homeopathy. It is highly likely that his parents were also vegetarians, but there are no records to verify this.

Brereton Senior was a traditionally trained doctor who also practised homeopathy. Like most vegetarians of his time, he was actively opposed to vaccinations and promoted dress reform. He also opened the first Turkish baths in Australia, wrote religiously inspired verse and was a well-known figure in Sydney society. Literary figures such as Henry Kendall were frequent visitors to the Brereton's large house, *Osgathorpe*, in Gladesville. Fruit and vegetables were grown in the house's large grounds - which presumably contributed substantially to their diet - and there were also extensive areas of virgin bush. Brereton Junior called it 'an Eden' and this is where he learnt to love Nature, which played such a strong role in his literary and personal life.

Brereton Junior was born in 1871. He was later a student at the University of Sydney where he later became an assistant, and yet later, librarian. In 1921 he was appointed the university's first Professor of English literature. A major figure in literary Australia of the time, having written and published a novel, several plays and a large number of poetical works, he was also a knowledgeable and respected critic as well as a friend and benefactor to many struggling writers. Brereton, who had what has been described as an almost 'sexual' love of Nature<sup>3</sup>, would spend all his free time wandering in the Australian bush with a tucker bag full of oatmeal, rice and lentils. His most famous work, *Landlopers* (1902), tells of a walking trip that he took accompanied part of the way by the poet, Dowell O'Reilly. In it, he records not only his impressions of Nature but also mentions the paucity of vegetarian food available to travellers. He mentions shopkeepers who find his purchases funny and, at one point, stated miserably that, 'I touch no flesh of any kind, and had lived entirely upon damper and tea since our arrival at Wombeyan'.<sup>4</sup> Soon after, he reported that he had stolen a large marrow which gave him some much-needed variety. Many of Brereton's walks lasted days - often weeks - and when he was well off the beaten track would invariably walk naked. Unlike Chidley, Brereton does not seem to have been stigmatised by his diet or behaviour. Among his closest companions was Henry Lawson who (according to Lawson's daughter) considered Brereton to be his best friend. In fact, Lawson so liked Brereton that he wrote and dedicated poems to him, whilst Brereton financially supported Lawson in his declining years.

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3 Harper, Melissa, *Sensuality in sandals: representations of the bush in the walking and writing of John Le Gay Brereton and Percy Grainger*, *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 31 no.115 Oct. 2000, pp.287-303.

4 Brereton, J. Le Gay, *Landlopers: the Tale of a Drifting Travel, and the quest of peace*, Sydney, 1902, p.122

Brereton was, not afraid of taking ethical stances and was a vocal defender of Chidley when he was facing his many trials. He also remained in contact with Meatheringham over his continued promotion of naturism and vegetarianism. He was one of the few who openly challenged the press in defence of vegetarianism, including writing a spirited response to one of the *Bulletin's* more reactionary anti-vegetarian comments.

The artist and writer, Norman Lindsay, with his anti-clerical, anti-wowser and masculinist social theories and art (often called 'vitalism') was antithetical to vegetarianism. Lindsay supported the *Bulletin's* view of vegetarianism and wrote a piece for its literary sister publication, *The Lone Hand*, entitled 'Unclose season for vegetarians' which humorously suggested that vegetarians should be hunted and was accompanied by a cartoon of butchers attacking vegetarians.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lindsay, Norman, Unclose Season for Vegetarians, in *The Lone Hand*, 2 August 1909, pp. 392-393.



Many, however, could not – or would not - ascribe to this masculinist ethos. One such dissenter was Lindsay's own eldest son, Jack (1900-1990). Jack was the author of well over a hundred works of history and fiction, as well as numerous poems. While initially a great supporter of his father's views, he revised his opinions after leaving Australia for England in 1926. The difficulty this caused in his relationship with his father lasted for the rest of his life, and he never saw either his father or Australia again. In England, Jack Lindsay became a committed Marxist and a

vegetarian for the last sixty or so years of his long life. He would later write of the motivation for his change of diet:

“Only by discarding a diet based on rotting corpses could men become sane. The fantasy of needing a blood-diet, a corpse-diet, was inseparable from the distorted relation to the parents I had been trying to clarify in myself and which one way or another existed in everyone. The corpse-eater was still in fantasy feeding on the parents.”<sup>6</sup>

The above passage shows how closely entwined were Jack Lindsay’s vegetarianism and the rejection of his father and his views, but this alone would surely not have kept him a vegetarian for as long as he was. Rather it must have been his sense of justice and hatred of cruelty that was the prime motivator.

Someone who did share many of Norman Lindsay’s ideas - and was almost the epitome of a true Australian larrikin - was Australia’s greatest composer, Percy Grainger. Both Grainger and Lindsay admired each other’s work and shared many attributes. Both had demanding mothers, disliked the Church and wowsers of all types, and both had two singularly overriding passions - their art and their sex lives. Where they differed was that Grainger was a strict vegetarian, having become so in 1924.

According to his article published in the *American Vegetarian* entitled *How I Became a Meat-Shunner*, Grainger stated that he had adopted the diet after hearing the arguments of George Bernard Shaw from a woman he had met. This was the culmination of a gradual change. He had started to visit vegetarian restaurants in Europe as early as the 1890s with his many European vegetarian friends, and had apparently long been considering the move. As he said:

“All my life, I have been sickened by everything connected with meat-, fish-, and poultry eating. As a child, I saw apparently nice, kind people wring the necks of fowls, and I thought it foul; and I wondered if I could ever exert any influence to help bring such unworthiness to an end.”<sup>7</sup>

Another probable motivating factor in his change of diet was his fanatical fitness regime. Whenever possible, Grainger ran (long before jogging was fashionable!) and also took a great delight in manual labour. During the construction in Melbourne of the museum in his honour (1935-1938) he could be found on the building site carrying bricks and generally labouring

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6 Lindsay, Jack, *Fanfrolico and After*, London, Bodley Head, 1962, pp217-218

7 Grainger, Percy, *How I Became a Meat-Shunner*, *American Vegetarian*, Vol. V no.4, Dec. 1946, p.4.

shirtless in the sun. Of course his famously active - and we must imagine, intensely physically demanding - sexual life would also attest to his fitness. He believed that his vegetarian diet, which generally consisted of nuts, rice, bread, fruit and ice cream (he disliked vegetables), allowed him to maintain this necessary fitness.



Percy Grainger, by Dupont, A. (Aime), 1915, courtesy of National Library of Australia. nla.pic-an24651591

In an age when everybody wore hats, Grainger stood out with his unruly wavy hair *sans* headgear. His clothes were also a talking point - especially the suit that his mother made for him out of towelling. Even when not wearing outlandish garb, he would still seem relatively unclad to most people in the United States where he spent the majority of his adult life. His lack of clothes got him into trouble at times and he was once arrested in a case of mistaken identity. When asked why he was wearing so few clothes in the middle of winter, he evidently replied to the enquiring policeman:

“I do not eat meat, I do not smoke, and I do not drink, and therefore, I do not feel the cold.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bird, John, Percy Grainger, Sydney, Currency, 1998, p.253

