

Commemoration of Kristallnacht Sunday 8 November 2020 — 82nd Anniversary

Occasional Address:

*Burning, Banning, Boycotting, Editing and Expurgating Books:
The ever-present struggle for Freedom of Speech*

This talk is about banning and burning books and boycotting their authors. It is about destroying knowledge and suppressing the free communication of ideas. This has been a blot on nations and individuals for over 3000 years, reaching a crescendo in 19th and 20th century Germany. This form of censorship continues to this day, even here in Perth, for the last 120 years a paradise for its Jewish population.

My talk starts at the top of Murray Street. In 1959, the Western Australian Medical Students' Society Journal, *The Reflex*, was burned by the Registrar of the then three-year-old Medical School. According to the Western Australian historian, Professor Geoffrey Bolton, the only other publications burned in Australia in the 20th century were the 4th edition of the *Pelican* and a satirical student magazine called *Sruss Sruss*. These three UWA publications were thus elevated far beyond their station to join an illustrious list of similarly treated 'subversive' manuscripts. The early 1930s publications attacked the Vice-Chancellor, Prof Hubert Whitfield for demanding censorship of student publications and parodied Alexander Ross, the foundation professor of Physics and Mathematics, who demanded retribution. The student editors, Jim MacCartney, and Griff Richards were censured and rusticated for one year. The student guild was ordered to pulp or burn the offending publications and for reasons of self-preservation, obeyed these instructions.¹

Although the Registrar, Mr Jim Crawley, predicted that I would bring shame upon the new medical school, I was not sent down. My edition of *The Reflex* contained several articles that I had commissioned from my teachers. The most important, written by the pathologist Dr Jack Little, was 'Doctors Under a Dictatorship'.

The purpose of this paper was to illustrate how members of a medical profession, rich in medical tradition and once leaders in the world of medicine, became mass murderers when the 2000 year-old ethical principles of medical behaviour were ignored.'

A census taken of the residents of 'greater Germany' in May 1939, six years into the Nazi era, reported that 54% of German citizens were Protestant, 40% Catholic, 3.5% other believers, 1.5% atheist and 1% were Jews. No wonder that Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS and a key architect of the Holocaust, had ordered the Gestapo to compile lists of doctors who showed 'Christian Attitudes.'

¹ Macartney became the managing editor of *The West Australian* and Richards became the Editor. They remained mavericks and their greatest coup was to outwit the British Secret Service to report to the world the 1952 ultra-secret British Atomic bomb tests at the Monte Bello Islands north of Onslow.

In fairness, many German doctors rejected the theory of eugenics, of survival of the fittest and the elimination of the unfit, such as children with neurological disorders and ‘untermenschen’ such as Gypsies and Jews who Nazis doctors likened to a cancer that had to be destroyed for the good of the genetically superior Aryan majority. But these ethical German doctors were slow to organise and to express their disquiet and, like the Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller, quickly found they were no longer in any position to do so.

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—

because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—

because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Nazi doctors developed split personalities. Beasts to Jews, Gypsies, Slavs and homosexuals but normal empathic doctors when treating their civilian and military patients during the heavy bombings and massive battles of the last years of WWII.

The Dutch medical profession were made of stronger ethical fibre. They refused to cooperate with any German direction that threatened the doctor–patient relationship, even when 100 Dutch doctors were sentenced to be sent to concentration camps.

Dr Little’s article was important for future doctors because it showed how easily a previously noble profession could forsake their traditions, the Hippocratic Oath that they had taken on Graduation and the sixth of the moral foundations of Western Civilisations, “Thou Shalt Not Murder.”

Dr Little also drew attention to the fact that many of the worst medical atrocities were perpetrated by medical academics who took the opportunity to experiment on people that they had interned in concentration camps.

The preface of the 1943 edition of the premier Anatomy Atlas of the 20th century states that: “This magnificent atlas has come about by the lucky conjunction of brilliant illustrators and a ready supply of bodies.”

I will come back to *The Reflex* and the mindset of the man who burned it. But first I want to present a very short history of the long tradition of burning books.

Wikipedia lists 200 infamous book burnings starting 2600 years ago.

We Jews who have long made up less than 1% of the population of Europe and the Middle East figure in 10% of them. Burning Jewish prayer books and the Talmud (a collection of Jewish civil and ceremonial law) was a particular preoccupation of a succession of medieval popes.

Their pyromania was a precursor to the burning of Jewish books in the new nationalistic Germany that developed after they had defeated Napoleon's France in 1815. German students travelled from all over Germany to Wartburg, the town where 300 years earlier Martin Luther had found sanctuary after his excommunication by Leo X. There the students burned Jewish books and called for the expulsion of Jews (and Frenchmen) from all German universities.

The prophetic quotation "Where they burn books, they will in the end also burn people" comes from the tragedy *Almansor* that Heinrich Heine wrote at this time.

Despite the background of antisemitism in Germany, Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were in the vanguard of liberal thought. Josef Goebbels, the virulently antisemitic Minister of Propaganda, declared liberalism to be un-German. He ordered that all Jewish books, including the Bible, be publicly burned on May 10th, 1933. The main centres of book burning were the university towns where in the words of Ursula Hegi in her historical novel *Stones in the River*: "students were organised to burn the works of many authors they would normally have studied."

People, like Goebbels, who burn books obviously don't read too many of them. If they did they would know that in the long run the inquisitor and the censor have nearly always been cast as history's losers and villains.

So why burn any book let alone a medical student journal? By contemporary standards that 1959 edition was a work of scholarship. Only four pages contained jokes so benign that no modern medical student or conservative nun can see what the fuss was all about.

The Medical School Registrar was a diligent worker, a solid citizen who taught at Sunday School. But in keeping with many book-burners in history, he was a rigid and narrow-minded man who was certain about what was right or wrong. In his limited field of vision a few jokes about contraceptives were more important than issues of medical education and Nazi medicine, which are still being debated 60 years later. He was not a man who could tolerate an opinion different from his own. He showed no respect for the contributors of the articles nor for the editorial work that had gone into producing the journal. He gave no thought about the Medical School's responsibility to the advertisers whose contributions had paid for the journal. He did not seek the opinion of any academics nor did he talk with me or anyone on *The Reflex* editorial panel. That is the psychopathology of people who burn books.

The Reflex had an official censor. Perhaps he never read it. But he did sign off on it. And like Pastor Martin Niemöller, he did not speak out.

Censorship and suppression of ideas is common in our society even in universities and professional institutions that claim to encourage the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom and the airing of all points of view with the exception of hate speech.

Censorship begins with boycotting talks by people that the executive of the student guild has declared to have objectionable opinions. Even high profile thinkers such as Germaine Greer.

Censorship progresses when CEOs and media departments vet and, without the writer's agreement, sanitise their contributions and also refuse to publish anything that they deem controversial or less than flattering to their institution.

The members of this phenomenal organisation need no exhortation to stand up and speak out. When censorship of critical expression happens to any of us we should stand up and speak out and introduce our wavering acquaintances to Pastor Niemöller's lament.

We owe it to those who only 82 years ago tomorrow, were subjected to terror and had their property wantonly destroyed in a prelude of much worse to come.

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