

OBITUARY

## John Michael O'Brien 21 December 1945 – 10 January 2023

Rowan Cahill

School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia  
Email: [rowan\\_cahill@uow.edu.au](mailto:rowan_cahill@uow.edu.au)

(Received 13 March 2023; accepted 13 March 2023; first published online 13 April 2023)

**Keywords:** class in Australia; education unions; industrial relations strategy

Friends announced the death of John O'Brien via his Facebook page and invited sharing. As news spread, condolences flooded in. From these, it became clear that John had lived a multifaceted life and embraced numerous identities, variously teacher, academic, opera buff, tenor chorister, patron of the arts, respected and much loved Queer Community elder. Early in the piece were condolences from the leaderships of the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

John was born in 1945 into a large Sydney Irish Catholic family with significant links to the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and a key role in the politics aimed at limiting the impact of the 1955 Split on the party's New South Wales branch. The childhoods of John and his sister Susan were complicated by the health issues of their pastrycook father, a World War 1 veteran, whose war injuries excluded him from his trade. Their mother was a negative cutter/editor who worked in Cinesound. Performance was part of their childhood, with John having roles in Tivoli pantomimes and singing on Catholic radio 2SM until his voice broke.

During the 1950s and 1960s, branches of the family variously moved and lived in the then working-class Sydney suburbs of Bondi, Guildford, and Auburn. Matriculating courtesy of a Marist Brothers' schooling, John enrolled at Sydney University in 1964. There he distinguished himself in the Sydney University Union Debates, modelled on the Oxford Union Debates. In these, John developed his future and significant oratorical skills, characterised by rapier wit, the ability to think on his feet, and the use of passion without losing logic and purpose in the process. In terms of scholarship, he shone in History and Government.

Newly minted with a Bachelor of Arts and a Diploma in Education, he spent most of the 1970s immersed in the study of Australian Catholic religious and political history, his focus on New South Wales and the period 1835–1870. Within this he explored the intensity and bitterness of anti-Catholic sectarianism, Catholic mobilisation towards inclusion in the social fabric of a society built on their exclusion, and within the unity of Catholicism the tensions and divisions of theology and politics. This period produced an MA (University of Newcastle, 1972), two scholarly papers, and four significant academic articles in journals of religious studies. Read today, the MA thesis is of doctoral calibre (O'Brien, 1973).

From 1972 to the early 1980s, John worked as a secondary school teacher of English and History employed by the NSW Department of Education. He was something of a rarity. Few school teachers then had postgraduate qualifications or a CV including academic articles.

It was a time of turbulent teacher politics as a large and confident cohort of university-trained teachers, shaped by the social movement politics and issues of the 1960s and early 70s, entered a profession with a quiet industrial relations history since the formation of the NSW Teachers' Federation (NSWTF) in 1918. They faced low pay rates, entrenched discriminatory attitudes and practices regarding gender and sexuality, large class sizes, government underfunding, and employer and public attitudes that regarded teachers as public servants who should simply serve and do so in a servile way. The first strike by the NSWTF had only recently occurred in 1968.

Based in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney, John distinguished himself as an effective and savvy grassroots militant NSWTF activist, speaker, and strategist and was elected to the union's policy forming State Council. His speeches tended to be show-stoppers – passionate and influential. He became part of an activist-intellectual formation within the union known as The Leftovers, speaking to and for a leftist constituency independent of entrenched ALP and Communist Party interests, and was an early advocate for women's rights within the union and the teaching profession.

In 1980, the NSWTF decided to bankroll a doctoral scholarship to produce a post-war history of the union, updating an earlier work by historian Dr Bruce Mitchell (1975). Professor Jim Hagan of the University of Wollongong was in the process of soliciting trade union funds to finance labour history scholarships and hosted and supervised the project. O'Brien got the gig, earned his doctorate, and published his first book, *A Divided Unity! Politics of NSW Teacher Militancy Since 1945* (1987).

Exhaustive in its archival and oral research and documentation *A Divided Unity!* depicted the Federation as an organisation replete historically with tensions and divisions, the latest being the politics of militancy in which he had participated. It was in the tradition of EP Thompson's 'history from below', reflected a materialist understanding of history, and was attune to political economic thinking. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the book was not appreciated by some in the union's leadership. Eschewing hagiography, it was not focused on the centre, giving emphasis to the union's democratic structures and the rank and file. For John, it was his gateway into academia.

In the years that followed, John variously worked at the University of Canberra and the University of New South Wales, becoming an Associate Professor and post-retirement an Honorary AP at the University of Sydney. When he entered academia, the flirtation of the academy with labour history since the 1960s was ending; the study of industrial relations as a contested realm was also ending as the politics and promises of the Accord reshaped industrial relations and the arbitration system was dismantled. In their places, the neoliberal academy instituted Business and Management schools along with the notion of Human Resources.

For scholars trained in the old schools of Hagan and their ilk, the message was clear, adapt, or opt out. Many who remained and worked in the new culture, like John, variously built careers while also trying to keep flags flying for social justice, particularly in relation to fair pay and working conditions, maintaining the relevance of collective mobilisation in an intellectual and political regimen that argued otherwise. John had a full career of teaching, research, supervision, and mentorship. He sole-authored two books, assured of long lives post-mortem as they uniquely captured and detailed important aspects of Australian social, political, and industrial history, co-authored another, and variously authored/co-authored monographs, chapters, research articles, as well as articles outside the academy.

The focus of John's scholarly work was collective bargaining, public sector management and employment, which included the education sector. As an academic, he led from the front as a unionist and became ACT branch secretary of the Union of Australian College Academics. The 1980s was a time of change as the politics of the Accord reshaped Australian industrial relations and as enterprise bargaining was adopted. John became

a national force as he helped build the NTEU. Coming into being in 1993, this union increased the industrial strength of Australian academics and other university workers from a wide range of tertiary employment sectors. He served on the union's National Executive from 1994 to 1998 and remained active until the mid-2000s. In the early 1990s, he was a union nominee on the Higher Education Council, a principal source of higher education policy advice to the Australian government.

The creation and work of the NTEU were the subjects of John's second major work, *The National Tertiary Education Union: A Most Unlikely Union* (2015). In this he detailed the complex, at times messy, processes of negotiation and compromise that brought five unions together as founding partners in an 'unlikely' union, each with their own industrial relations histories and cultures of autonomy. In John's study of its first 20 years, the NTEU emerged as an industrial organisation that punched above its weight, managing to work with its structural tensions of centralisation and decentralisation, unity and disunity. These were dialectical dualities he had examined in his early studies of Catholicism, had experienced during his activism in the NSWTF, and had written about in his doctoral work. As for the union's future, well for John that was a 'work in progress' for future unionists, and in the book by implication and suggestion he made suggestions about the way forward.

There are modern academic treatises on these dialectics of discord and unity, but they were also dealt with by the Medieval scholastic theologian (Saint) Thomas Aquinas in his encyclopaedic *Summa Theologica*. According to Aquinas, *discordia* (dissent) within the church 'is not a sin nor repugnant . . . because genuine concord is a union of wills, not unified opinion'. It is not improbable that John, in his beginning as a scholar of Catholicism, was not unaware of this teaching on dissent and unity.

John died 10 January 2023 after a year of medical issues that coalesced to bring the curtain down on his determination to enjoy partying, music, friendship, and theatre to the full.

## References

- O'Brien JM (1973) *Catholics and Politics in New South Wales 1835–1870*. Newcastle, NSW: unpublished MA thesis.
- O'Brien JM (1987) *A Divided Unity! Politics of NSW Teacher Militancy since 1945*. Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- O'Brien JM (2015) *The National Tertiary Education Union: A Most Unlikely Union*. Sydney, NSW: New South Press.
- Freddoso AJ *New English Translation of St. Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae (Summa Theologica)*, II,II,q.37, a.1, University of Notre Dame. <https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/Part%202-2/st2-2-ques37.pdf>

**Rowan Cahill** is an honorary fellow of the Faculty of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Wollongong. Prominent in the anti-war, student protest, and Free University movements of the 1960s and 1970s, he has worked as a journalist and historian for unions covering seafarers and waterside workers and taught in the secondary school, technical education and prison systems of NSW, and since 2007 as an academic. His books include two co-authored with historian Terry Irving, *Radical Sydney* (2010) and *The Barber who Read History* (2021).