

# Fighting the Good Fight

## Ruth and Maurie Crow Then and Now

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**In 2016, Melbourne tea and coffee merchant McIvers began selling Ruth Crow tea, a product with a ‘gentle smoked flavour infused with vanilla’. The tea commemorated Ruth Crow as a North Melbournian, as a campaigner with a legacy in ‘just urban planning’ and as a believer in community. This paper argues that Ruth (and her husband Maurie) have become somewhat commodified, if not sanitized, in the 21st century; the McIvers Tea does not, for instance, celebrate the Crows’ half-century of dedication to communism. However, if the Crows (Ruth, in particular) are coming to symbolize certain aspects of inner-city community, the reality is also that they began this process themselves, in the 1970s if not earlier.**

**Keywords** — *Ruth Crow ; Maurie Crow; Melbourne.*

### INTRODUCTION

Ruth Crow Tea, a product sold at the McIver store at the Victoria Market and in the company’s West Brunswick outlet, is not merely a very palatable item amongst many produced by this small-scale, but high-minded company. It is notably the only product created by McIvers that commemorates any individual, much less a local celebrity who, however much she might remain a guiding and positive influence to her many acolytes, nevertheless still requires explanation on the product bearing her name. It reads:

*Humanitarian, environmentalist and social activist Ruth Crow AM (1916-1999) believed that when people came together over a cup of tea, they could go on to do great things. This tea’s gentle smoked flavour infused with vanilla harkens back to a period of rapid growth and burgeoning industry in North Melbourne, Ruth’s home. This special blend honours her legacy of just urban planning and salutes all community champions who ‘fight the good fight’ for a resilient future (McIvers 2016).*

Most notably, while the red rose petals and the Russian Caravan in the blend recognise Ruth Crow’s longstanding (63 year) allegiance to communism, this fact of her life is not mentioned on the tea’s explanatory text. Similarly, the other – and perhaps more important, although also indivisible – influence on her life, her husband Maurie (1915-1988) is also lost in translation.

This paper does not intend to suggest that either of these omissions indicate a conspiracy on the part of McIvers’, or any other commentators’, assessment of Ruth Crow (or her husband Maurie, for whom a tea has yet to be named). It is plain that only so much information can be accommodated in a 75-word blurb, and one key to promotion is concision. Yet as Ruth Crow emerges as an important 20th century historical figure, albeit in the limited field(s) of Melbourne’s ‘urban

activist’ and community politics of the 1950s-1990s, and as a recognised figure amongst politicised, activist women of her period, is she being commemorated, or ‘re-made’ to a 21st century template which ignores and/or elides other elements of both her work and her personality? If this is the case, a secondary question might also be: to what degree did Ruth participate in such elision?

This paper can necessarily only touch on some of these issues, and will do so in large part by providing an overview of Ruth’s life provided in the many short memoirs, as well as lectures and teaching materials which incorporated memoir, in Victoria University’s Crow Collection and in family archives. The paper is a tentative step by the present author towards a larger and more comprehensive study of the Crows, whose partnership appears resolute for the half-century they were married. It is necessary from the outset to mention that of the two, Ruth’s early life in particular is far better documented than Maurie’s, primarily through the material she assembled. It is believed however (and there is a modicum of evidence to suggest this) that the two had similarly affluent childhoods, a fact which – funnelled as it was through experience in the 1930s Depression – may have greatly influenced their lifestyle choices in adulthood.

### RUTH CROW: EARLY LIFE AND FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

Ruth Crow was born Ruth Miller in Ballarat in 1916, the third child of what would eventually be five. The Millers ‘had their own pews in church’, Ruth’s nephew Andrew Hemingway recalls, and were pillars of the local Presbyterian community. Her father, Dougald, was a dentist and her mother, Winifred, a teacher prior to marriage. Ruth had fond memories of a middle class childhood with ‘an amazing supply of books’ (Crow 1997) inherited from her grandparents; the family home, Rossie, had been theirs as well. The supply of reading was topped up frequently by her father who, it appears, was free and easy with his ample finances to the point of carelessness. Ruth’s mother was involved with the local Baby Health Centre from its establishment in 1922 (Anon 1922) and became its president; as such, Ruth later wrote, ‘she did “visit the poor”.’ (Crow 1997)

Winifred’s sister Ruby was married to Matthew Baird, a leading light in the Australian Natives’ Association and later a Minister in two state conservative governments, serving at one time as Minister for Education. Ruth recalled her two older brothers – Communist party members like herself in the 1930s, though unlike her later to leave the party – would proudly stand behind Baird on the podium as he (in his words, according to her recollection) ‘[a]ddressed the rabble’ (Crow 1989). Her father Dougald wrote Baird’s speeches.

Baird’s death, in 1931, may have been distressing for Ruth and her family, but the following year heralded a genuinely traumatic tragedy: Dougald died unexpectedly. It was not only the question of missing a beloved patriarch. ‘Suddenly we were left penniless,’ Ruth wrote. ‘He was bankrupt’ (Crow 1997).

The family sold ‘Rossie’ and relocated to Melbourne where they were, at least, able to retain face by living in Mandeville Crescent, Toorak:

*We rented a small house with a ‘good address’ and through skimpy housekeeping, wearing cast-off clothes and saving fares by walking the family managed “to keep the wolf from the door” (Crow 1997).*

The life Ruth knew vanished when she was 16. The following year she was working as a shop assistant in Mantons Department Store in Bourke St Melbourne to fund her education (Crow 1991 p. 1).

It does not seem that it was her Mantons experience but her employment as a maid in 1934 which politicized her, or at least led to her first experience as an organizer of workers. She formed a Domestic Servants Club in Malvern as ‘one step to improve the conditions under which domestic servants worked’ (Crow 1991 p. 2). This organisation did not last long, but taught her valuable politicking experience. In the same year, she was given a ‘free place’ in a Diploma Course at Emily

McPherson Technical College, where she came first in a number of more science-oriented courses. She was awarded a Senior Technical Scholarship and a Diploma in Institutional Management and Dietetics (Crow 1991 p. 5). However by the end of 1935, she was prevented from continuing her education, which she simply could not afford.

1936 was arguably her second great 'formative' year. Working as a cook in a Private Hospital, she was sacked after contacting the union to improve conditions (Crow 1991 p. 3). But if this accelerated her radicalization, it could not compete with the force of nature that she encountered in Maurie Crow, a 'tall, angular man with an engaging smile' (Murphy 1998) this same year. The two met at an anti-fascist youth camp organized by Students For Peace 'It was called the Youth What Next? Camp', she recalled almost sixty years later, 'Maurie was involved in a group called the 'Veterans of Future Wars' and I was more involved in general living standards and nutritional issues' (Martinkus)

The two were married at the end of the following year. In one retelling of this Ruth bundled her marriage as part of the exodus of all her siblings from their mother's household and her influence. 'Not only did we all leave home,' she writes, 'but several of us rejected the conservative political values which had been imposed on us in Ballarat' (Crow 1997). Ruth would imply, though this is not overtly stated, that she had no contact with her mother in the last decade of Winifred's life.

#### RUTH AND MAURIE CROW: THE PARTNERSHIP

'One of the special things about Maurie was his attitude to women,' Ruth would later remark. 'He was gentle but very courageous and persistent' (Murphy). She credits her husband with introducing her to feminism, which would have had considerable attraction as an ethos for this headstrong and independent young woman. Planning their marriage, they were 'determined that we would not perpetuate the relationships in society which resulted in homes being both a HAVEN and a HELL' (Crow 1996).

Maurie was already a member of the Communist Party of Australia when Ruth joined in 1936. She would later casually remark that she did so in part because 'I didn't know where the Labor Party was' (Davis 1993). However there was clearly much more than happenstance to this decision. They were to attend branch meetings and study circles fortnightly and deliver the newspaper *The Guardian* (later the *Tribune*) for the next 36 years until the early 1970s. This close involvement devolved slightly into more community based 'practical' work in the last decades of their lives, but neither would resign from the CPA and indeed Ruth outlived it.

For three years at the beginning of World War 2, which also included the birth of the first of their two daughters, the Crows operated a tea room in the Dandenong Ranges, a part of the world which had a beneficial effect on Maurie's asthma. Little is recorded of their life there, although they certainly retained a fondness for this part of greater Melbourne. It was still the early 1940s when they embarked on one extremely important lifestyle experiment marking their distinct disconnect from the individualistic, materialist mainstream Australia.

In 1943 Ruth applied to run the Brunswick Children's Centre, in part on the basis (she was to write) that her presence would force the effete middle class women who operated the Centre to take it seriously. She was given the job, and the Crow family moved to Brunswick that year. Andrew Hemingway recalls:

*There was an old bank, they had one room that occupied the whole upstairs at the front. Everything they did in that one room, apart from their ablutions, they slept there, they didn't have a kitchen or a dining room, everything was in there.*

Hemingway recalls that Ruth and Maurie had 'a conviction... they had to prove the community system could work.' They were, he recalls, 'hellbent' on utilizing as many local facilities as possible, 'spending a lot of their time outside.' In the room itself, 'folding beds went up into the walls – Maurie had a stove he could push out the window and cook out there.'

Ruth herself wrote of the flat 'above the shops, close to the Brunswick Town Hall... a living space 30 feet by 20 feet... For the first few years it was one large room but gradually, as our needs changed it was partitioned' (Crow 1996). She typified the room as one of many 'home' places in the area, the others being a bookshop 200 yards (180 m) away; the Brunswick Baths where the family swam daily and saved on bathing; the Presbyterian Church's lawn; the Brunswick Childrens Centre; the Mechanics Institute Library and the Albert Street School. She also reserved a special status for the tram stop, which enabled access to an infinite number of possible locales. She did not mention Maurie's window stove when she told a journalist in 1993 that 'I often joke that I never cooked a proper meal for my family. Maurie had his meals at work at the children had theirs at the childcare centre' (Martinkus). She would later write:

*Life in the Brunswick flat, the rich neighbourhood life in Brunswick and the social and political life of the 1940s and 1950s enabled us to put some of our theories on family/home/society relationships into practice (Crow 1996).*

There is little mystery about the derivation of these 'theories'. The notion of living a public life was taken directly from Soviet practice which was itself based on the exigencies of a housing shortage in a rapidly urbanizing nation and a desire to control citizen behavior through limiting of private lives and intimacy (see Harris 2013; Crowley 2002). Soviet apartments notoriously (or at least reputedly) often lacked kitchens (Attwood p. 115). Lynne Attwood relates that Soviet policy from the 1930s advocated communal eating and that the Soviet press frequently lauded the increase in child care facilities – a subject close to Ruth's heart (Attwood p. 168). Kommunalka, as it was known, meant people 'were encouraged to... make use of communal recreational facilities, and see their "living space" as simply somewhere to sleep (Attwood p. 3, p.4). Attwood writes of Khrushchev-era Soviet interiors as:

*based on simplicity, modesty and utility... Furniture should have more than one function: sofas should turn into beds and incorporate hidden linen cupboards, bookcase doors should open out to form writing desks or dining tables, and crockery cupboards should be concealed beneath table tops. (Attwood p. 164)*

Folding furniture was a key component of the Crows' Sydney Road apartment life.

In the late 1950s, when their daughters were teenagers, the family relocated further north, to Coburg, a house Hemingway recalls as 'quite a nice place... a house with three bedrooms and a garden at the side.' He remarks that 'They'd proved their point by then.' In a curious twist, one of Hemingway's sons, Martin, rented the Sydney Road space decades later when he was a university student. Andrew and his wife Sue both recall persuading Ruth to revisit the room in the late 1990s, where she sat in a chair with her legs over the side and reminisced about her time there.

In 1945 Ruth was the recipient of a bursary to study Group Work Techniques in the Social Work Department at the University of Melbourne, under the tutelage of the recently appointed Arthur Livingstone. This course had previously entailed practical work in Melbourne's slums, but it is not known what form it took under Livingstone. At the beginning of 1951 Ruth became part of the Union of Australian Women, a breakaway from the more conservative Housewives' Union.

Any historian attempting to track the Crows' activities from Ruth's own records and reminiscences is hamstrung by the fact that while 'start dates' are recorded, there is little status afforded *endpoints*. Additionally, Maurie's activities in the 1950s are largely obscure. It does appear that he worked for unions (primarily the Clerk's Union) and facilitated connections between unions, citizens and other bodies. After his death, Ruth described his work 'at all levels, with students, unions, business groups and different political groups which allowed him to create powerful coalitions which often got things done' (Murphy). She added that his proudest achievement was 'giving people a vision of their own power to change society' (Murphy). He only emerged as a public figure, however, in the mid-1960s with his involvement in urban planning. A precursor to this is the late 1950s when he campaigned for federal aid to municipal councils; in the early 1960s, Ruth notes, Maurie switched from union work to becoming a 'functionary' for the CPA which meant the family had a 'reduced, precarious income' (Profile of Ruth Crow, p. 6).

Hemingway recalls little of Maurie. 'Maurie seemed to be a shadowy figure,' he says. 'She dominated, he was passive. He'd disappear into another room – he wouldn't take much of a part in conversation when we were there.' Notably – and this is backed up by other informants who knew the Crows in the 1970s – he was keen to take a 'back seat' lest his membership of the CPA taint the causes of urban conservation and community consolidation. He was 'protecting potential supporters from embarrassment' (Murphy).

In the late 1960s Ruth travelled to the USSR as part of a CPA women's group. One of her associates from this time, Yvonne Smith, remembers it as a 'bit of an eye-opener' but does not believe Ruth, any more than anyone else on the trip, was disillusioned by the experience. Smith recalls, for instance:

*The women's movement over there – I assumed, I was stupid I suppose – I assumed it was an open women's movement. It wasn't that sort of association at all, it was a top-heavy, appointed group of women. That was a bit of a comedown. I thought by that time they might have loosened up their hold and restrictions.*

There is no record, however, of Ruth's own opinion of this period and indeed this trip – the one time she left Australia – is conspicuously absent from her many and varied autobiographical overviews.

The next important step in the Crows' career as advocates and visionaries was their move from Coburg to North Melbourne, which they undertook in the mid-1960s.

## IDEALS FOR LIVING IN THE 70S AND 80S

In 1968, Ruth and Maurie joined the North Melbourne Association; Ruth claimed in the late 1990s that she was 'A foundation member' but her own record keeping in other reminiscences, such as her overview of the NMA's history as preserved in the Crow Collection, shows this is only roughly true; the Association had existed since 1966 (A Profile of Ruth Crow, p. 7). It was the first of the residents' action groups in Melbourne, though it was initially established not to agitate for preservation of heritage housing stock or lower waged inner city residents, but to create a neighbourhood consciousness for a varied range of (primarily) new residents. In this, it might well have appealed to the Crows, for whom 'the important thing' was to get 'people involved' (Murphy). Ruth began writing for the local press, chiefly the North Melbourne Advertiser in which she initially appeared as 'Una Voce' and later under the banner 'Ruth Writes'. Her topics went from local to global, linking ideology to neighbourhood issues and events.

Although fond of Ruth, Yvonne Smith remembers her as 'an odd character, she rubbed people up the wrong way': She worried about the fact that she annoyed people a bit. Everyone admired Ruth but... she was a bit hard to take. She talked a lot and she talked in an odd manner, too. But I thought she was terrific. She was very helpful to me. She helped me see the practical application of work in the community.

Anne Sgro, who first met Ruth in the 1960s and worked with Smith at the Union of Australian Women, is of the same mind:

*She was quite singleminded, so she could back you into a corner before you realised you had been, and she'd tell you what she wanted to tell you. I think it would have been a personality thing, rather than a strategy, she probably didn't realise she was doing it.*

It is not initially clear when Maurie became directly interested in urban planning, nor is it completely certain that it was his interest more than Ruth's, though this was one notable time when a range of planning-themed articles appeared under his name in the communist paper *Tribune*. It can be assumed purely by dint of the timeline that this was a result of

the North Melbourne experience. This was as close to the CBD as the Crows had lived, and was a very different place to Coburg which might well have seemed trapped in time and unlikely to change soon. North Melbourne, part of the City of Melbourne, was succumbing to a range of pressures, a battleground for renewal as both office space (overspill from the city centre) and denser housing.

Three major projects emerged from this interest, over a twenty year period: the three-part *Plan for Melbourne*, the similarly formatted but community-consultation driven C.A.N. Plan; and Make Melbourne Marvellous. In all cases, Maurie Crow is likely to have been the key instigator, but was not eager to be identified as a main author. In 1967, as mentioned above, Maurie began publishing articles regarding the problems of city expansion (Crow 1967).

Key problems were that of access to the city; the growing dependence on the car and urban alienation that resulted from the latter (and arguably the former). Solutions were reworked and promoted in different configurations, many aspiring to encourage urban Australians to rethink the present systems they were living under. The Crows envisaged a more efficient neighbourhood featuring what they called a 'Cluster-and-connect system' in which each neighbourhood included a neighbourhood house. Make Melbourne Marvellous proposed a 'new tenure system with "shelter title" for rental or purchase by instalment at a price determined by public valuation. Price-fixing would end landlordism as a means of making capital gain.' At the same time, a single computer-determined shelter payment would cover all household costs, without need to pay to individual utilities. The document proposed banning junk food and discouraging car use to the degree that most commuters would be required to cycle. The report was controversially launched by Melbourne's Lord Mayor, Eddie Beacham, who had not read it and told the *Age* he 'did not endorse' it (Ecclestone).

Perhaps the most radical of the Crow proposals, appearing in the third part of *Plan for Melbourne* and in associated publicity from the period in which it was published (1972) was that of a linear city proposal, a concept almost certainly inspired by Nikolai Miliutin's 1930 publication *Sotsgorod*. In the Crow iteration, a linear city would be constructed along the 126 km-railway line between Melbourne and (for instance) Traralgon, near Moe in Gippsland. This extensive 'spine of development' would feature a string of 'local centres of 100 000 people' as well as smaller towns inbetween them. 'In their skinny corridor,' one journalist wrote in 1990, 'everyone would have the bush as his back door. At weekends, instead of fleeing smog and concrete, people would seek the stimulation of the city' (Stevens). The Crows were adhering in large part to vintage garden city principles, providing space for noxious industry's worst pollution to be dispersed where it would (probably) do minimal harm, and cultivating space for recreation both active and passive, in urban units which would almost by dint of their proximity to the railway line, be self-limiting. 'An elongated urban strip,' Maurie wrote, 'would mean the best of both worlds' (Crow A 1972). Expanding on this idea, he wrote in the *Melbourne Age*:

*If 15 new Canberras (population 120 000) were built in Gippsland and connected to each other we would be combining the advantages of decentralisation and access to the big city... With a fast transit rail system capable of speeds up to 125 mph places like Traralgon would be as close time-wise to the central business district as Mordialloc, Glen Waverley or Eltham. (Crow B 1972).*

As a somewhat perplexing sidenote, Leonie Sandercock, an acolyte of the Crows' whose seminal book *Cities for Sale* (the preface of which thanks both Ruth and Maurie) is peppered with references to their *Plan for Melbourne*, attributes the linear development idea to Robert Gardner, the president of the Town and Country Planning Association between 1972-75 (Sandercock p. 153). Sandercock was close to the Crows at this time and her attribution is not to be disregarded, though its rationale may not be straightforward, bearing in mind Maurie's own willingness to disown his ideas so that they be taken on face value.

This proposal was in the context of the state Labor party, which would not attain government for another decade, proposing 'five rural centres with growth levels equivalent to Canberra by 1985 and 15 by the year 2000'; (Decentralise!) the Hamer government would develop similar proposals to expand Geelong, Melton, Sunbury, and even Seymour.

While the Gippsland corridor was not, of course, initiated, the Crows' work was recognized, in the form of the 1972 Robin Boyd award for 'notable contribution to the literature of the built environment' ('a very unexpected recognition', Ruth said) (A profile of Ruth Crow p. 7) and the 1973 Barrett Medal for Town Planning.

*Make Melbourne Marvellous* was Maurie's final foray into planning literature; relatedly, however, he produced the well-received *Seeds for Change*, a product of his role as national organizer of the 'Radical Ecology Conference' (A Profile of Ruth Crow, p. 7).

#### CONCLUSION: RUTH AFTER MAURIE

When Maurie died in 1988, an event in his honour at North Melbourne Town Hall attracted 400 people (Stevens). Attendees were asked to wear a name badge incorporating the year they first met Maurie, the implication being that he was a man of many parts. The speakers were arranged chronologically in order of the period in which they first met him.

Ruth resigned from her various committees, claiming that she 'wanted to... use the time I have left to popularize Maurie and my ideas' (Martinkus). It was left to her to be the curator of their legacy, a function she took to with enthusiasm. In 1990 the Footscray Institute of Technology (now Victoria University) purchased the Crow Collection of books, archives and ephemera, and Ruth made it her business to be a featured presence in the collection at least once a week for the rest of her life.

In 1991, she was an attendee at the first Urban History, Planning History conference at the University of NSW, at which she is remembered for being an exceptionally engaged participant. In 1993, she accepted a Queens Birthday Honour after some prevarication; 'I am grass roots,' she said at the time, 'and once you start getting something that puts you above other people then you have got to watch it. Some people might be intimidated by you' (Martinkus).

Ruth's death in 1999 saw extensive tributes and obituaries, including a long piece by Leonie Sandercock in *Urban Research and Planning* acknowledging her as a mentor. It is clear that there is a wealth of further information to uncover about what made Ruth and Maurie 'tick' and what they – particularly Ruth in her final decade – thought they did and what their legacy should be. Yvonne Smith and Anne Sgro, however, should have the last word on this remarkable individual. Sgro says:

*I can still hear her voice. She'd ring up, say what she had to say and then say 'ta ta' and you'd think – hang on, I haven't said what I want to say yet! It was very funny. Ruth would tell you what she wanted you to know, no niceties. I remember saying to Yvonne 'God, Ruth Crow, the older she gets the more she becomes...' and Yvonne said 'Ruth Crowish?' Exactly!*

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