Fitzroy History Society
Oral History Project
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Transcript of interview

with Tony Birch

(Interviewed by Hilary McPhee and Rosa Simonelli from the Fitzroy History Society at Fitzroy on 4 November 2016)

Tony Birch is a novelist, poet and short story writer who often draws on his childhood growing up around Fitzroy and Collingwood for his writing. Born in 1957 in Carlton, he speaks about the Housing Commission demolitions in Carlton and the Atherton Estate in Fitzroy, both of which dislocated his family, and the deleterious effects of slum demolition on the social fabric of both the extended family and the wider community. He discusses his schooldays, the social fabric of the time and place, and particularly the role of strong women in the community who held the family and the community together, often against overwhelming odds.

He provides many stories and anecdotes, both amusing and tragic, about the harshness, domestic violence and poverty of multi-cultural life in the inner city in the sixties and seventies. He is acutely observant of the unwritten social rules which govern how people interacted.

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[Aside discussion]

Facilitator: Just let me say at the [beginning] it's 4 November and we're interviewing Tony Birch and it's Hilary McPhee interviewing with Rosa Simonelli as well. Okay?

Tony Birch: Okay.

Facilitator: Tony, off you go because we haven't had anyone…

Tony Birch: Off I go.

Facilitator: We haven't had anyone talk about living in…

Tony Birch: You've got to ask the question.

Facilitator: I'm about to. We haven't had anyone of your age, also, your generation, or talking about living in the Housing Commission. So if we can talk about demolition and streets going and all of that stuff.

[0:33]

Tony Birch: Yeah.

Facilitator: So where would you like to start? Where did you start?

Tony Birch: Well we actually - I was born in Carlton, born at the Women's Hospital, but we lived in 92 Canning Street. So I was born in 1957 and my mother and grandmother lived in 90 and 92 Canning. My great grandmother, that is my mother's grandmother, lived in Young Street, Fitzroy, and she'd been there since about 1920 in Young Street. My great grandmother is a remarkable woman who married an Irishman but then after their divorce she married a man from Punjab, [Poontukan] who was a Muslim guy.

That was at the end of the First World War, she went to India, had five kids in India, came back to Australia. He died, she married his brother. So they had that Fitzroy house and what's important about that…

[Over speaking]

Facilitator 2: So which Fitzroy House was this?

Tony Birch: Young Street. It's gone now.

[It's part of the] flats. That was really important because there were three Muslim Punjabi families and they had a really strong presence there. So I've still got great aunts and uncles and cousins from that side of the family. My dad, they lived further up Young Street and they'd been there since about 1900 and they were, again, a really strong family of Aboriginal, mostly West Indian. Because one of my forebears is a man called [Prince Moody] who came from Barbados as a 14 year prisoner for the crime of disobedience.

Facilitator 2: Came here?

Tony Birch: From Barbados… [2:10]

No, from Barbados to Van Diemen's Land, to Tasmania, and then he became a sailor who worked in the Bass Strait Islands and up the east coast. They came to Melbourne late 19th century, but in fact they established a very famous fruit market in Collingwood called the [Moody's Fruit Market] which used to be next to the Town Hall. So I had great uncles who were part of that family. Now they lived up Young Street very close to Gertrude, but we lived in Carlton.

So then in 1959 the Housing Commission bulldozed that part of Carlton, or that part of Canning Street, for the Carlton Estate. We moved to Fitzroy so that my mum could be close to her grandma and my dad, they were married and his mum lived around the corner. We had cousins around the corner…

Facilitator 2: You were in a house in Young Street.

Tony Birch: Yeah, no we were in a house in Atherton Street which now, of course, the estate is named after. So we lived at 56 and my grandmother lived next door. She moved with us to 54 and her younger kids, my uncle and aunty used to live there still with her. Then, as you would probably know, the Housing Commission compulsorily acquired much of that area in about 1960-1961 and then they gradually started to pull down houses. People often don't realise those houses were pulled down over about a six year period and our house was one of the last to go.

Facilitator: There's a description [of/in] one of your [stories]…

[Over speaking]

Tony Birch: Yeah, so we moved… We moved out on August 20 1966 and…

Facilitator: Leaving stuff behind?

[3:42]

Tony Birch: Oh, everyone left stuff behind and the reason we left stuff behind was that it was really ratty stuff. So had those old wooden spring beds and they had bed bugs in them and I don't think we took much with us. I think my mum got a whole new sort of flat of household furniture out of the Salvation Army and I don't know if we paid for it or if they gave it to us. So we moved to the Richmond Housing Estate and what was really, I suppose, awful for that generation of parents is that I had about six or seven households in those set two streets. So I had my great grandmother was still alive, she moved out of…

Facilitator 2: Was she very old?

Tony Birch: Oh, she was in her 80s. She moved out of Young Street into the Hanover Street Commission flats, my grandmother unfortunately went out to Preston to a house and we went to Richmond to a flat. My mum's sister, my godmother, went to the Northcote flats. Because no one had ever driven a car those distances were quite long. So we went to Richmond for four years and lived in the Housing Commission. My mother hated it literally so much that after about four and a half years she told my dad she wouldn't stay there anymore.

So he was working at St Vincent's Hospital as a cleaner and a woman he was working with, a nice Italian woman, had a house in Maugie Street, Abbotsford so we moved there. Then we lived there for about two and a half years and they bulldozed that house to build the Eastern Freeway. Then - this is actually, my latest novel *Ghost River* is all about that area. Then we moved to another house in Abbotsford for a while.

Then my mum was lucky that a lot of the, I suppose, the culture in the Housing Commission changed and there was a spot purchase scheme came in, or an individual purchase. So she was one of the first tenants in what was called the Fitzroy/Collingwood Housing Association where they bought a house in Charlotte Street, Collingwood where she's lived now for I think about 35 years.

[5:47]

They took her into the house, said would you like to live in this house? It was a double fronted terrace house, and she said yes. So then of course it had to be renovated and remodelled, so they engaged her in all those processes, what she wanted in the kitchen, what colours she wanted…

…and it was really, it was very democratic. So she moved in there with my stepdad and my younger brother and sister and she…

Facilitator: What year was that?

Tony Birch: That was about 1975, 1976. It was certainly in the mid-1970s and they're still there. I think probably, in some ways, that's probably the best scheme the Housing Commission ever came up with. One, it allowed people to stay in the inner city and two, they had some - I think people just invested more in the sort of housing stock they were in. It was genuinely humane and…

Facilitator 2: You weren't policed the way you were describing being policed in the Richmond flats.

Tony Birch: No, well in fact I think my mother has a house inspection once a year which she's happy for because she can point out all the things that need fixed. No, it was nothing like the surveillance of the Housing Commission earlier and it does allow people, if people don't want to publicise the fact that they're public tenants, they're just people in another house in the street. So although that part of it wouldn't have worried my mum.

I think the other part I really like - because I went to a couple of meetings with her early on, she asked me to go to a couple of meetings - is that the people that she was involved with from the Housing Commission, they were much different people. Basically they were the young 25 year olds who'd come out of the protest era, so they were politicised in a fairly - they were socially conscious people [7:30] and I think she got on well with them. It was a real dramatic shift for her.

Facilitator: Mm, and you grew up there?

Tony Birch: No I didn't. No, by the time she moved to that house I actually wasn't living at home. I basically left home after - about the same time she moved into that house, so I was about 18-19. So all my time before that I'd basically spent obviously with my mum and my grandmother living close by until the - well, the period that my grandmother moved to Preston didn't last, in fact, she hated being away. She was lucky, she managed to get a Housing Commission flat in Miller Street, North Fitzroy.

Then she got one of the newer houses that came out of the partial demolition of Brookes Crescent. She was there for a while and then as she got older and she got

quite, well relatively sick, they moved her back to Collingwood because my mum lived very close. That was also, I think, the Collingwood Estate, although it's got a bit of a reputation the way they developed some of the facilities for the elderly there have actually been quite good. So she was very close to my mum there and my mum was able to look after her every day.

My older sister moved to the Collingwood high rise, into the [20s] and she was there for about 20 years. Then my older brother, he moved out to one of the first Housing - well, not the first Housing Commission estate, but he was the first in our family to move to the suburbs and move to Broadmeadows to the Housing Commission. I've got…

Facilitator: Right, and had a car and could buzz in and see everyone.

Tony Birch: No he - we're not great drivers. He's close to the Broady Station. My younger brother, I've got a half-brother who's got three boys, they live on the Broadmeadows estate very close to the Town Hall. What's interesting about that is because Broadmeadows has such a notorious reputation, which is ill founded considering the way Melbourne works,

[9:32] that

keeps the prices down a little bit. So he was lucky to get a really good house, bought a house privately which is an ex-Housing Commission house, but it's very close to the railway station and all the facilities. So they've been very lucky to live in an area that people actually think's still the wild west, when it's not.

Mm, so it's good to have a poor reputation if you want to get a cheap house.

Facilitator: Did you bump around schools a lot in the area? Or did you stay in your…

Tony Birch: No, no. …Well not until I was expelled.

Facilitator: You had a bike or not?

Tony Birch: No, I went - we were pretty - well, it's hard to say we were serious Catholics because my mother never went to church, [she cheated]. We were brought up Catholic so that I went to Sacred Heart Fitzroy, and in fact while Sacred Heart was being built my older brother and sister were at the Academy, they had boys there. I think it was about 1959-1960. But we were at Sacred Heart Fitzroy and then from Sacred Heart Fitzroy we went to a little school which is no longer there which people mistake for St Patrick's East Melbourne.

There was a St Patrick's school in Fitzroy at the end of Young Street and in fact if you go up to where Australian Catholic University is the side that the main campus is on is the old mint, and then the other side where they've got a couple of big lecture theatres now, behind Cathedral Hall, or what people call Central Hall, was our school.

It was a little three teacher school. It was a boys' school, only Christian Brothers, Grade 3 and 4, Grade 5 and 6 and Form 1. There was one Brother for 3 and 4 and about 50 boys, one Brother [11:12] for 5 and 6 and about another 50, and then just Form 1 with the Headmaster who had about 30 boys.

Facilitator 2: Alright, and a big ethnic mix in the school? It would've been.

Tony Birch: Oh, not - well mostly, to be honest, mostly dominated by Italian boys. So that when I went to Sacred Heart I can literally rattle off all my friends in the - it's coincidentally the only non-Italian friend I can remember is Andrew [McCluskie] who lived in this house. So all of my primary school friends were Italian. Mass of course was still said in Latin. I was an altar boy at All Saints so I remember doing, we'd do funerals, always large Italian funerals. So predominantly Italian.

In fact most of my family, outside our immediate family, didn't, they all went to George Street State School. So we were the only family to go to the Catholic school and then when St Patrick's closed my older brother and I went to Cathedral College in Victoria Parade which had been Parade.

That's no longer there either. Nothing I've ever been to is there. Then of course when we moved to Richmond I stayed at Cathedral until high school and then I went to Richmond High School on the River which is no longer Richmond High School. Then I got expelled from there I think early in Form 4.

Facilitator: For?

Tony Birch: Oh, fighting. …Then I got a job as the telegram boy at Richmond and I really didn't like it. My mother was cleaning for a lovely guy who actually lives up here, Peter Stapleton.

[12:46]

Peter was teaching English at Princes Hill and my mother was cleaning Peter's house and Peter got me into Princes Hill…

…and I got expelled from there. It was quite funny because I run into Peter a lot now with his, I think his daughter's dog, and he says to me you're still the best student I ever taught, and he says getting expelled was probably good for you. So I didn't move around that much with school.

It's one of those, I mean we understand why the Catholic Church gets bad press, but when I went to high school I was surprised at the students.

[Aside discussion]

I was surprised at the students, how - I [thought/felt] they were basically remedial level because the Catholic education and there's one thing - if there are two things we can thank [Mannix] for is one he was Anglican [unclear] and two he was determined to have good education set up in the inner city for poor kids. The academic standards were really high so when I started at Richmond High School I was like a mile ahead, by the end of the first year I was a mile behind.

I think that it's one of those things that that period of a sort of - and I don't say this to - almost a laissez-faire approach to education from those people coming through. It just didn't work for me, and I've talked to a lot of friends about it since, so you know there's a café on Brunswick Street, Sila's, well the guy there, he's an old St Pat's boy, he was in my brother's year.

I think why we did so well in school and why we liked it is that school for us was incredibly orderly and I was amazed that I had my own desk and I could have my own stuff and no one could touch it. Whereas at home you had to share everything. Even in our house my mum was a bit sort of fixated with cleaning, it could be really

[14:48]

chaotic and I actually loved the order of school. Then so when I went to the State system at secondary, for me it became quite - having no boundaries is the last thing that someone should ever give me. I need to be told what to do.

Facilitator: So being a telegraph boy, tell me about that? I haven't heard…

Tony Birch: Oh, well I was the telegram boy at Richmond for about six months…

[Over speaking]

On the bike, yeah, and mostly, to be honest, telegrams you think well, what are they for? I mean in any day you might get one or two birthday telegrams, you might once a week get someone's death, and usually it would be if someone died interstate or in a country town ad a lot of people didn't have telephones, they'd send a telegram to a relative. But most of it basically was businesses and I think for some companies even though they had telephones it was the way they sent written material.

Facilitator: Right, before fax probably.

Tony Birch: Yeah, and the other thing of course is that because Richmond had a meatworks, [Protein Holdings] down in Burnley Street what they used to - because this is during the period when Wally Curran was with the meatworkers and he was a very militant union leader, well they used to go on strike every week. What would happen is when they were ordered back to work they would send every worker a telegram, so you couldn't say you missed, I wasn't told to go back. So when that happened you'd be riding around all day… delivering telegrams.

So I mean I did it for about six months and I had a couple of mates from school who did it. It was a very, sort of a lot of freedom, but even though I was only 15 I just thought oh, it's too hard.

[16:29]

I remember riding in that summer up Bridge Road hill and I thought I can't do this. So I had some brave idea that I'd go back to school and apply myself, but that didn't work.

Facilitator: But you did go back to school at that point, you gave up that job and went…

Tony Birch: I gave up and went to Princes Hill and I was going okay until I fell in with the wrong crowd. So I basically - I think, but that time I think getting expelled was more just a series of minor misdemeanours that added up to yeah, you're not, you're wasting your time sort of stuff. Which was exactly true, so I left.

Facilitator: Mm, and meanwhile back to your mum. You write about mothers and women incredibly well, obviously your grandmother, all of those people in your life were very strong and important, weren't they?

Tony Birch: Mm, oh yeah and I think that - I think the issue there is that most of the men were absent and partly absent at work, absent at the pub, absent with other women.

My dad would go for a week and come back, he said he'd go out for the milk and come back a week later, he never had the milk with him, it was remarkable.

Facilitator: That's quite a common story we've heard, the fathers just would come in the back gate every now and then.

Tony Birch: Yeah, and also the men - I mean, I know two families very well who the father had multiple families and no one knew until they died. In the case of very close friends in Carlton, my mum's mates, they lived only streets apart which is remarkable. I mean that takes a lot of strategy I think to get that…

But I think that it's not surprising that it was women that held families together and in our case I think my mum, until we went to the flats, it was also the great fortune of having a lot of family women around her. So she was very close to her younger sister Maureen who was my godmother, she was very close to her mother. Her grandma

[18:27]

was around the corner and she was good friends with my dad's mum. So there's a lot of strong women.

I think you can't underestimate the economic and social relationships that came of that and that's probably the failing of - I mean, there are many failings of slum demolition but one of them is that. That women had really acute social networks and they were really savvy about - like there was a pawn shop on Brunswick Street, which is also gone, just around from what was called Fleet Street, just below Gertrude and their use of the pawn shop economy was important. Looking after each other's kids if some work came up, they did all that stuff of taking in washing and ironing.

So that they lived - and even to the point where we would go out and collect firewood and then we'd have to drop some at my aunty's and my nan's and vice versa. Or my dad, he had a mate - … my dad had a mate who was a sort of career thief and he used to steal in the department stores in the city and he'd leave stuff at our house. But what was funny, he offered my dad money and my dad said no. Because I think it was his brother-in-law worked in a boning room, so he used to pay my dad in steak. So he'd come around with big pieces of steak and stuff.

So all those networks, women really ran those. But I think also if you were a boy growing up in that time you either have to, you either go with the masculinity or

you don't. I think the difference for me is that I was repulsed by that very early on and understood, not with any clarity, but I understood the deep hypocrisies in male sort of bravado. So that whether it be men…

Facilitator: Without having anything to do with the pub life, you weren't following your father as some boys did.

Tony Birch: Well what was quite interesting, I sold papers in Gertrude Street with my older brother, so we went into every pub in Gertrude Street every night and in those days when we started it was still six o'clock closing and then 10 o'clock closing. I mean I wasn't - what I like about

[20:40]

that, or what it taught me, is I was very good at reading a public situation. So I'd never been, I wasn't afraid of it, we knew how to sort of get around, we were quite street smart and stuff like that. But at the same time what you tended to find in there was a lot of men and the women in there were never their wives.

They might be working women. So I knew a couple of - and are still family friends - women who'd worked as prostitutes in the '50s and '60s but usually they'd be single women and younger single women. So that my dad would take us to the football and he'd always have a girlfriend up the back. So he'd get us a seat on the fence and because you want to get a seat on the fence you wouldn't, you know.

You'd go up the back to get some money off him to get a pie or something and there'd be some sort of strange woman there. Then on the way home he'd say oh, well don't say anything about this to your mum. So you'd be sort of very anxious about that complicity. So that was one aspect of it. But the real serious issue of course is domestic violence and…

Facilitator: Mm, that story about the butcher's wife.

Tony Birch: Yeah, well that's a true story.

Facilitator 2: Was part of that body found in the vacant block in Gore Street?

Tony Birch: I can tell you the - probably, I know there were two - oh yeah, of course it was. Behind…

Facilitator 2: Because I lived across the road from there and it was great excitement.

Tony Birch: Yeah it was behind, yeah exactly, it was behind where the art print gallery thing is now and they've only just rebuilt on it.

Yeah, so they found… [22:13]

[Over speaking]

They found sort of most of the torso and a leg there, they found some other body parts down in Greeves Street, but over the other, towards Smith Street. Then in my story I changed, they did find the head near Rushall but I think it was in the Edinburgh Gardens, but in the story I had a dog eat the head so, why not?

I mean what's remarkable about that story, the truth of it is a couple of things that always struck me is I knew the story and then when I was going to write the fictional story I thought it cannot be possible that that woman was acquitted, she must've been found guilty by insanity or something. Being a historian by then I had a PhD I went and found the murder file and she was acquitted which is remarkable.

What I usually…

Facilitator 2: But I remember people in the neighbourhood were sort of saying well, it served him right.

Tony Birch: Oh, absolutely…. In fact one of the things that's interesting here is the judge said - which I do use in the story - in the summary the judge said considering the gross indecencies committed against the woman, which would've been rape in marriage, he can't imagine there was any other outcome for the woman. So in other words cutting his head off seemed to be a reasonable thing.

Then I published the story individually and then I published it in *Shadowboxing* and what happened was that about five years later I was at the Adelaide Writers' Festival being interviewed by

[23:35]

Richard Fidler and I talked about the story and a girl I used to go to school with who was her daughter, she heard it and she sent me an email. I really panicked, she said I'm the daughter of Val da-da-da-da and I [unclear] - it's one of those things as fiction writer where you think you're responsible, I try to be - oh, no.

Then she said my mum never told us about what had happened to my dad until the late 1980s and I've since read your story, I'm so thankful because it justifies what she told us. So I was quite relieved but, yeah, it was the thing that people said he deserved it and they were so relieved. I think it's one that always - I mean obviously when we think of the wider discussion of domestic violence now, particularly in the last couple of years, we also know that it's a, it affects all women across all cultures and classes.

I understand that accept that but the fact is there's something quite particular about when people in the abject disadvantage about what becomes of men. My belief is that yes, it's important to recognise that this is a society wide problem, but I don't think it's evenly spread, I don't think that. One of the things that is so obvious that's changed is that men who knew other men did this either did it themselves and didn't say anything, or even men who didn't enact violence against their wives or kids they would never say anything about it, and not out of fear, it was like…

Facilitator: Solidarity.

Tony Birch: Well it's interesting, it could be [unclear] in some cases, but it's more like you just don't do that. It's interesting because people don't understand to what extreme people would take things, like you'd never contact the police and people think oh yeah, it might be out of fear. Now it could be, so there could be a criminal who there could be repercussions, it could be out of solidarity, but in most cases you just don't do that, this is not what we do as people and you accept that.

[25:45]

So that - I interviewed a lot of women about domestic violence and the ones who had never contacted anyone, there was some shame, but some women said well, you don't go to the police. Not because the police wouldn't help, because the police - and this has changed, thankfully - a woman said to me, why would I go to the police? She said men in my life were violent, including police in my life. She said, so it's like going from one violent man to another and in those days there were some really quite violent police around.

I mean some of the local Fitzroy police had a really notorious reputation for violence, and when I interviewed a couple of prostitutes who had long retired, one of them said to me the last thing that I want happening to me, [if anything], like rather than getting in a stranger's car was getting locked up in the Fitzroy

Police Station. She thought that was the most dangerous place to be. So yeah there's some pretty crazy - and a lot of that sort of thing that people don't, a lot of summary justice. So people would look to the…

[Over speaking]

Facilitator: Mm, and it wasn't about worrying about what the neighbours would think, because they were all in it together, was…

Tony Birch: I think it's not so much about what the neighbours think, but what the neighbours can't ignore. So that in the story it is the sense that I still believe that that man was killed because he hit his wife in the street and everyone saw it, and…

Facilitator: Yep, that moment when they turned away, [they'd seen it], yeah.

Tony Birch: Yeah, when it's behind the front door you can all hear it but you can pretend it's not there. The fact of it happening in the street, it's probably the utmost sense of shame that people feel of being seen and it's all out there. I think my feeling is that I always believe that that's what tipped her over, is that was the ultimate humiliation and he had to go.

[27:42]

Facilitator: Yeah, and the other story about the abortionists and you kids recognising something odd was going on.

Tony Birch: Yeah. …Well the interesting thing about abortion, again, is that because we were Catholic there was this outward sort of horror about abortion. So you, obviously it's coming from the Church, it's coming from the pulpit every Sunday and this is just before the Bertram Wainer controversy, just before that which is I think late '60s. A lot of - well, anecdotally from family a fair number of women required abortions, whether they be young girls or younger women who were single or married women who didn't want to have any kids anymore. Because the pill hadn't come on the scene, or not widely at least.

I think is that, again, publicly keeping their distance from the abortionists but, of course, many women also being involved in transactions. I think that what it also does is - I didn't concentrate so much on the personality, it wasn't the yeah, you get this sort of the backyard abortions, and we know how horrific that can be medically. I remember I've talked to Janet [MacAlmon] about this several times

and the terrible infections that women turned up with at hospital which is obviously about a medical procedure.

But my sense was that it wasn't, these women performing the abortions weren't evil either, and they were a bit amateur, but what else, yeah. It was much harder to get an abortion off a doctor and certainly much more expensive for those who would do it, which was quite rare. Of course, again, people who could afford an abortion off a good doctor would also be people in a different class.

I mean I remember my first, one of my other first jobs was when I was 20 years old I worked at St Vincent's Hospital…

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…as a theatre technician and everyone knew that - because in St Vincent's Private which has a four theatre floor, I think it was fourth floor, no, second floor, each surgeon would sort of half day, so you might have plastics, you might have oral surgery, you might have eye, et cetera. Everyone knew that there was a half day where the gynaecologist came in and did what, you know, D&Cs and most of those were abortions.

But this is in a Catholic hospital so they were - oh and one surgeon said oh, well this is about trying to get them in order so they can get pregnant. So again, it's those sort of - which is a terrible situation for any woman to go through, whether it be in a house or whatever.

But it is a case of when we lived in Canning Street a woman who lived behind us, so she was in Station Street, who was an abortionist. The police raided her house and just before they raided it her daughter came out of her back gate into my grandmother's back gate with a foetus wrapped in newspaper and handed it to my grandmother and said, get rid of it. My grandmother wouldn't, she just left it on the kitchen table and wouldn't go near it. My mother said she remembers seeing blood sort of seep through the newspaper but no one would open it.

That woman, I know that woman she certainly went to gaol and I think there was a woman in the house who was bleeding to death at the time so an ambulance came. So yeah, it was a really horrific period but it was a period where, again, everyone sort of pretended that they weren't involved.

Facilitator: Yeah, and the women helped each other, that was the other aspect of that…

[Over speaking]

Tony Birch: So it just highlights what happens when you don't have something humane and regulated.

[31:22]

Facilitator 2: Were you conscious when you were growing up in the inner city that you were living in what most people considered to be a dreadful slum area, that it was considered dangerous especially also with migrants, because they weren't particularly well…

Tony Birch: Yeah, it's quite interesting… I mean some of it - I mean it's interesting, I was saying to Hilary, I mean you don't have, one, well you don't have anything to compare it to. But I knew at the time when we lived in Fitzroy that my mother and grandmother kept their houses very neat, but they were also in shocking condition and that couldn't be hidden. I had a really almost - well I have now - I had an incredible fear of rats, which I think is reasonable, and we had a lot of rats.

So even though they tried to do the best they could literally when you're in bed every night rats would be under the, eating the lino, or they'd be out in the kitchen. As they started to demolish houses any decent rat goes to the other house, so we got more rats. So I was actually fearful of that. But the other aspects of it like living in a very crowded house, having sort of - like what there was no sense of was, say, we never had any hot water. So we had a cold water tap at the sink and a cold water tap at the gully… and a…

[Over speaking]

Facilitator: Outside…

Tony Birch: A copper that you would put wood under. The only hot water bath we had was literally of a night my mum would heat enough water, she would get a tin, we had a sort of tin bath, small one, a hand one, and we would all take our turns to bath in that in the kitchen. What's interesting about that - which is, my wife laughs about that -

[33:03]

is that I think one of the really good things about living like that is you actually have a great respect for peoples' privacy. So that you don't want to look at your sisters when they've got no clothes on and so that you actually give people a lot of privacy, which I'm really sort of still stuck with, in a good way.

Also space, you know there's no space so you're very protective of your own space, but also respectful of other peoples'. So that was normal. What was so funny - and I don't know if you've been told this - but the House of Welcome in Brunswick Street had a double decker bath. So there was a bath and then a ladder and then another bath on top. So we used to go over there and have a bath on Saturday and there'd be about 30 kids. I think all you got to do was sort of get in the bath…

Facilitator: There'd be 30 kids queueing up for a bath?

Tony Birch: Yeah. Get in and sort of jump out the other end. I don't even remember if we had any soap.

Facilitator 2: Did they change the water?

Tony Birch: No. …Then we'd go through - always of course, the other thing is because my dad loved swimming we'd go over the City Baths or the Fitzroy Baths and of course have a shower. So you could use, so you're smart enough. But there was no, because we were all the same there was no one any different, so I don't remember anyone else having hot water.

Except there was one family at the end of Atherton Street where a guy went to - this is a true story of a kid - he went to school one morning and when he came home that night there was a bath in his bedroom all plumbed up. His dad had got this project to put a bath in and he moved his bed to the other side of the room, so it was the bathroom and…

[34:37]

…the bedroom. They were the only people I knew who had a bath.

So that part I didn't [realise] and again, I said to Hilary when I went to the Richmond Flats we had a quite, for us, luxurious flat so we had a bath, shower, hot water in the kitchen, running, everything. I mean I just thought it was fantastic, I thought it was remarkable.

On the notion of crime strangely that's probably the least thing I was conscious of and I think it's not that it's over exaggerated but I really think - I think people don't understand is that when you grow up you understand what you have only on its own terms. I've talked about this since. I mean I did an essay on homelessness

for Human Rights Watch and I did a piece on working on the food van outside the church one night and seeing these two kids get a pie each, and they were just so happy.

I didn't want to romanticise it but I understood when you live on the streets and someone gives you a pie, this is a moment. So for us it was all relative. So that part of it, I was never scared as a kid. We used to fight a lot but everyone did. I think it was when you went outside the suburb, so when we moved to Richmond and - again these were all working class people - people would say oh they're shit, they're from Fitzroy. So Fitzroy was certainly the lowest of those in the suburbs of reputation wise. So we were sort of looked down on a little bit.

The other thing that's interesting about migrants. I said most of my friends were Italian. There's a really peculiar habit, and I've always thought about this. Any person of my sort of generation, or at least into their 50s now and 60s, if they're from Europe in particular but they grew up in the city you have this immediate bond, you know there's something you - and a friend of mine calls it the sort of vibration of the street. I had a lot of kid friends in the street who were…

[36:31]

Tony Birch: I had friends in the street from Italy and mostly from Greece but there were Maltese, but I've got Maltese relatives so I sort of knew a bit of that anyway. There were kids from all over the world and the street was like your place. Never once in that time, and my mother never once ever told me ever not to bring anyone to the house. I was talking to this about an Italian mate of mine who I'm still mates with, never once did I go into a house of any of those people or them come into my house.

It was like we understood there was a boundary, and what is it…

Facilitator: Yeah, the boundary was of what? Difference? Or…

Tony Birch: Well I think difference and the domestic and the street. The kids owned the street but the parents owned the house.

But the other thing is that I interviewed four Italian women who'd moved out to North Coburg and they bought four suburban blocks. When they bought them the developer had already put the fences and fences in between. They took them all down, just had the out fence, and they said we made a little Italian village. But I

interviewed these women and they'd all worked in Fitzroy in the factories and I knew - my mum had always worked in factories and her sisters.

I said oh, did you have any friends in the factories with women who were Aboriginal women or, Anglo women? They said oh never, no. She said my dad said those women with the lipstick and the high heels they're all prostitutes don't talk to them, right. I said oh yeah, and they're laughing, they're apologising to me like crazy, I said so you never spoke to them at work? Oh yes, of course.

So in the factory, again, they would sit down for lunch, they would talk about their children, they would exchange food. My mum learned out to cook Bolognese because an Italian woman wrote out a recipe. But again, the factory was strangely a women's space, like the

[38:16]

lunchroom, but then when they went home you all went your separate way.

So I think that everyone understood where you could connect and where the boundary was, and people - I think, I really do think if there's a success around multiculturalism, and there is of course, it's that if - people don't understand how much changed in Fitzroy and to get your head around this, that if you look at that 1954 census there's registered they said 500 Italian people, 500 Greeks. In the next census which I think is 1966 or 1968 there are 5000 Italian and 5000 Greeks.

If you consider that, change in a suburb so quickly, there were no riots. I know there were issues, there were issues and I remember an Italian bloke told me when he went in a bar, in a pub once the barman spat in his beer. So there were issues and Italian men were talking about having to go deaf because otherwise they'd be in fights every day. So we knew that some of that existed, but I think by and large the fact that people knew when to connect and when to disconnect.

I reckon for a period that older generation, even if they turned their back on each other, it was they didn't want to have conflict. So sometimes - and I interviewed a remarkable Aboriginal woman, [Anjana Harding] who has since passed away, and she said to me, said look I worked in the factories, she said the women - they live in a boarding house.

She said when you go home of a night and those boarding houses she said each floor had one kitchenette and one bath, and you've got four households. She said if you don't get on with those women and find a way to share that she said you're

going to be fighting every night. She said so a lot of it was about negotiating things, and they did it.

I think what came out of it is that they - I think those older generations, I'm not saying they'd entirely keep to themselves because

[40:15]

in fact my mother's generation is what we call the rock 'n' roll generation. There's a remarkable period of intermarriage in the late 1950s, 1960s, of sort of - like, yeah it's a remarkable high level of Aboriginal women who married Greek blokes and Italian blokes which just doesn't happen now.

But their kids, so my generation, were able to break all that down. So that if you look at the generation of kids who grew up in the inner city in the 1960s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s who are now between mid-50s and early 60s you'll find a lot of them still marry in and become more Italian as they get older, but their friendships across ethnicities are real. So that - same as Richmond.

So there's a lot of Greek kids I went to school with in Richmond. When we have our reunions which we like them so much we meet every three months. You've got 30 and 40 people in that room all aged 59 from Greek, Italian and… the friendships are real. So I think it's a great success and I think people sort of underestimate it.

One of the worst things that came out of that period that - one is, and people may have forgotten this, the vilification against Italian single men in the press was, it would be literally as wild as it ever was with the racism against the Vietnamese in the 1980s or some of the… denigration of Muslims now. So the sort of horror stories that people had to combat against were really strong and people managed to think oh, that's rubbish. So I really think that is a great success.

I think the other one is that it does teach us that once you socially connect with people you have to make more responsible decisions. Sort of if you've got this image of Italian young men being sort of, they're always oversexed sort of thing, they could rape our women, it was that, it was that…

[42:21]

[Over speaking]

Facilitator: Yep, that fear of - which began with the War, the last War.

Tony Birch: Yeah, now you can either believe that until you meet Italian, like my dad working with Italian blokes at the hospital, well he's got to make his own decision about them. I think socialisation in most cases it overcomes that negativity, but at least if you're going to hold up to that sort of rubbish you've got to be, it's got to be your decision. Most of the times people were able to overcome their prejudices.

The other thing of course, is the people writing that stuff never mixed with Italians and Greeks.

Literally that thing where people say oh we had a Greek fish and chip shop owner or an Italian butcher or an Italian fruit shop, that's all they had. They could only cope with… three. It's very different.

[Laughter]

Facilitator 2: What do you think when you look at the changes that have happened?

Tony Birch: Oh it's interesting because, look, I used to be a lot more, I suppose I used to be a lot more antagonistic about it in some ways. I think part of that is…

Facilitator: Raging against the gentrificational stuff?

Tony Birch: Yeah, I was never a rager against gentrification, I was too busy getting pissed up, I'm not that political. But yeah, a bit of that antagonism about it. I live in Carlton so I live about 50 yard from where I was born. My sense is that there are a lot of people who do social demography and social geographers of which I did a PhD in

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urban history, they'll run this argument. Well, the inner cities across the western world are always places of dynamic change, they're always under contest, they're always in flux, there are always people coming in and out.

That's all true, but what people at least have to accept is but there is a power relationship of who comes in and out. Some people can come and go as they please, literally, like me, I can afford a house. I said I want to go and live where I grew up and I can go and do it, I can buy a house there. But people who live in the country who are still poor, they can't do that, they can't even afford rents there.

So the difference is, of course, it's an economic and political power imbalance that you say well, the fact is the people who lived there in the 1960s who no longer live there, they didn't have a choice of whether they were going to stay there or not, they were forced out and they can't get back. So I think that the dynamic aspect of it has some truth to it but I think people at least have to admit that your sort of social and political status informs that. So then you've got to admit being complicit in that without that being some sort of blatant accusation.

I mean you know that sort of joke about Fitzroy you can't buy a nail on Brunswick Street. I mean it's interesting because I don't have a sort of a - I walk through Fitzroy a lot to get to my mums and there's places I'll frequent, but it's not that interesting as in the commercial strips for me. I mean I understand the vibrancy of the restaurant culture and that's great, but it's not something that interests me. I think that it is, while people might think that's about diversity it's also quite singular in some ways. So it's not really that diverse.

It's often that you'll talk to people who live in the flats and it's almost like they live on an island within that. So I'm not that interested in it, but I'm also, I'm not - I don't give it a lot of thought. I think that one of the things that you've got to be conscious of is nostalgia can be a dirty word, but it can be - Arnold Zable and people with no - when

[46:06]

he talks about nostalgia and really sort of breaks it down in language of meaning in Greek, et cetera, it has really profound meaning for people.

So I think when people sort of recognise the real sense of loss that might be about family and space, that loss is real. Now you can't lay the blame of that at someone having a coffee on Brunswick Street but usually they're the only usual target.

One of the things that I did is that when I interviewed people if they had lived in the area of the Atherton Gardens [Estate] that was demolished the last question I asked people was, one is do you remember your family home being demolished, did you see it being demolished and how did you feel about it? I think what was obvious there was that most of those people had never been asked that question. Most of them broke down and cried and the ones who cried the most were men.

I think it's interesting that it was about men who hadn't let out that emotion. So a guy called [Vic Galliopolis] who had a Macedonian club on Gertrude Street and then moved to where Rose Chong's is, so just on that corner.

He was there before Rose Chong. His original…[The gambling club] …Yeah, his original shop was on the other side, when that was demolished he moved across there. When I interviewed Vic he was 93, he's not with us any longer, and he was with his daughter and he'd gone back to just speaking his own language so she was translating and she'd worked in the shop with him. When I asked him he started to cry and then he said something, she said he can't speak, he can't - and then he did.

It's [wearing the tin in *Shadowboxing*]. When my father told me - it was my father that said to me I grew up in a house of love

[47:50]

and what was remarkable was about the beautiful poetry that he - but for me, a strange sense of anger that I'd suddenly had this revelation of my father having an emotional life.

So I think that aspect of it really hurts people and unless you've gone through that as a forced even, I mean the thing that I talk about in *Ghost River* which is more apparent to me is that we owned that part of the Yarra River in the early 1970s. Because there were no bike paths, all those factories were derelict along there.

Facilitator: There were piles of blackberries that kids…

[Over speaking]

Tony Birch: Yeah, and trucks and stuff, and we sort of owned it. Then when they built the freeway a lot of people don't realise, again two things. How much of that landscape was lost for the freeway at the river's edge, and that the river itself, where you see now the confluence of Merri Creek and the Yarra is in fact…

It's artificial. The Yarra used to do a sort of dog leg up further towards Ransom Street and the Deep Rock swimming basin which they had this plaque for. I mean it was remarkable because these 15 year old kids go in the river and there's this ruin of a swimming pool in the river. So we had that and to see that literally bombed, they had to bomb the - because they couldn't get the jackhammers in there. It was shocking.

Facilitator: So you watched that happen?

Tony Birch: No I heard it, I was home. I went down next day it was all gone. I mean that's a pretty shocking experience. The other one, I think for me the most, well the most sort of revealing now is that we left Atherton Street on that Friday night which was 20 August. The only reason I remember that is it was my parents' anniversary. We moved to Richmond and then we had a huge sugar sack full of scrap metal in the toilet and we forgot about it. [49:44]

There used to be a scrap metal joint around the back of the Moonee Valley Hotel there and we used to sell to him. It was about the Tuesday or Wednesday, I was only 10 at the time, I said to my mum oh, we left our scrap up in the toilet. My mum being my mum she ended up doing anything you'd tell her. So I said, we've got to go and get it. So we got the - we still had our pram, so we wheeled the pram from Richmond up to Fitzroy but by the time we got there it was all gone.

But what was weird about it we couldn't find our, we couldn't even work out which was our house. Like sort of roughly, I remember looking across to what was then the Royal George, the Old Colonial, and saying it was sort of here. But that's a weird feeling.

Facilitator: Yeah, and the closest would be a bombsite, wouldn't it?

Tony Birch: Oh absolutely, and I think that…

[Over speaking]

…obviously the thing about a bombsite is there's more horror that goes with it but it's about that complete sense of dislocation.

Yeah, well there've been issues around this recently when they were going to put the East West Tunnel in about the loss of houses, so it still occurs. It's occurred in Australia, in other parts of Australia, when the…

Yeah, with the damming of landscapes, et cetera. So yeah, no that was probably the most horrific part of it. But I mean I think that like…

Facilitator: Tapping those memories and those visuals - this is about your writing, I know, and I did say we wouldn't get back into a kind of literary interview - but you tap the memories of those streets going, don't you. I mean you're right there watching it happen and… [51:21]

Tony Birch: Oh yeah, yeah. I mean the story in [part]…

Facilitator: …*The Red House* story, for instance.

Tony Birch: Yeah, or *The Bulldozer* story in *Shadowboxing*, absolutely and I think that what I wanted to capture in that story, which comes across, is the father's sense of loss which gives you this sort of window of his emotion. But also the surreal aspect of it. So that you're watching houses getting bulldozed with everything inside, so all the furniture, clothes. Then…

Facilitator: Mm, and beds hanging out over the upper…

[Over speaking]

Tony Birch: Yeah, and then of course the other thing is that we'd construct these massive bonfires and just burn a lot of it. So look, it was quite eerie. But I mean the other thing is to question to what extent, how does it affect the values you have as a child and I'm not too sure about this. But my great grandmother who lived behind us in Young Street, there was about six or eight double storey torrent stone terraces, so there's lot of photos. There's photos of them in that book. She lived in one of those and they all moved out.

But what would happen as soon as they moved out, kids would get in them because you'd find stuff. But it's sort of weird because I still remember quite vividly being upstairs in one of these stone terraces and there was one of those old marble washstands [unclear 52:40] and we loved to find them. Because people would get the marble and hurl it out the window onto the street and it would smash. So sort of everything was being wrecked.

Facilitator: Yeah, and the kids would wreck more.

Tony Birch: Yeah, and so you'd be going around these houses sort of smashing the marble with hammers, and a couple of times kids set fires to any houses. It's almost to what extent in your subconscious you're witnessing that violence, it creates that sort of sense in yourself so you love to wreck stuff.

[53:08]

Facilitator: Yeah, and a lot of nights would you gather around when the fires were happening?

Tony Birch: Oh, we loved a good fire. I've just been talking to a friend the other day, any time there was a fire you'd get a massive crowd whether that be a house or - I don't know if you remember [Diamond Cut], the fire in Smith Street? So they're famous factory fires in Fitzroy in Diamond Cut which is where Kathmandu is. That went up…

Facilitator 2: Oh, and in Gertrude Street, the old furniture place in Gertrude Street.

Tony Birch: Yeah.

Tony Birch: I remember when I was in Richmond the old Kodak factory in Abbotsford went up and we were all watching it from the roof, so people love a good fire. Incredible community events so yeah, people would gather around. I mean it's interesting that sort of stuff how its street life works, how while it - because the houses were so oppressively hot on hot nights everyone would sort of be out on the street. It's remarkable how an accident or something would bring everyone on the street and then you'd just hang around and it would turn into something else.

Yeah, so there was a lot of that, and I think in the end when people knew that the houses were going how people just lost that sort of, not pride so much but they lost that sense of wanting to care for something, because it was…

Facilitator: They were landlord houses mainly, weren't they? Or houses owned - yeah, yeah.

Tony Birch: Oh yeah, although ours was a guy called [Pellegrino] who was a nice guy who lived on Brunswick Street. He owned the three houses and I think he had a couple more. But it is interesting as well that we were talking before about when Greek and Italian migrants were coming from the 1950s, they actually started to do some [54:50] places up. What was shocking about that is that they bought houses, they did them up and then when the Commission compulsorily acquired them… they really got dudded.

So it was quite interesting, there was a guy in the newspaper called [Drago Golliki] who was one of the last people to move out of Fitzroy. He either chained himself out the front or he wouldn't leave and they forced him off. He paid - just after decimal currency, that was in February 1966 - paid about $6000, no $8000, he'd spent $2000 on it and then they offered him or gave him $6000 or something. He wouldn't leave so they forced him out.

I saw that in the paper and I was fascinated by it so I looked it up in the phone book and saw only one Golliki in Thornbury and I rang them.

Facilitator: Yeah, and it was him?

Tony Birch: Well it wasn't him it was his daughter and she goes oh yeah, Drago yeah, that's my dad. I said I looked at this in the paper and I said oh, is your dad alive? She said yeah, he lives here. I said oh, do you think he would talk to me about it? She said, my dad's been wanting to talk to someone about this for 40 years. So he got on the phone and, you know.

Yeah, so people like that really got dudded and the other thing with that is, you know if you look at the demographic shift we know that a lot of Italians and Greeks move out to the north east or to the northern suburbs. There's this blanket assumption - and I remember I gave a paper in the history department at Melbourne University one day and of course a few of the academics had moved into Fitzroy.

[56:20]

I think it was David Phillips who was living in Gore, David said oh of course, all the Greeks and Italians, they couldn't wait to get out of the inner city. I said, well not all of them, not all of them. Some of those people one, they didn't want to go, they had no choice but to go and some of them came back. So there's this whole assumption that they didn't want to live in the city.

When you talk to the kids of my generation now and they talk to their parents you know what their parents say? They say that there's no street life out here, they left the inner city, they hated it in Italy, they got it in Fitzroy and then they've never had it since. They found the suburbs pretty boring, a lot of people do. So no, that was shocking for the people who'd invested that sort of money and lost it.

They'd done so - a lot of people by the way had done so in good faith. Even though the Housing Commission had a caveat on those places after 1960, it was clear that they didn't understand that, or weren't told that or informed on it. Yeah, when it's just a stamp on your title it means nothing to people.

Facilitator: Yeah, and there was a lot of very crooked stuff going on as well… with developers that wanted to - the Brookes Crescents and all of that.

Tony Birch: Yeah. …Well of course the other thing, the rent freeze which had been instituted during the First World War was still in place and protected tenancy didn't totally go out the window until 1980s I think. What happened in the 1960s of course is that landlords who were subject to protected tenancy and they had not been able

to put their rents up, they needed to sell those properties and get people out of them. So they were involved in a lot of shonky deals to make money and get tenants out of places as well.

Facilitator: Mm, you've been drawing on this stuff for ages, haven't you? Which is fantastic. By walking around? By running around? [58:08]

Tony Birch: Oh…

Facilitator: You told me you ran all over the place.

Tony Birch: Yeah, I mean it's interesting because I think with *Shadowboxing* obviously that is a genuinely autobiographical novel and it was purposely so. When I wrote *Shadowboxing* I literally sat down and just wrote some key words to pick out over key memories or signature stories from my childhood or adulthood. Since *Shadowboxing* I would say that as a location I've drawn on the river more than any other location and now my characters are much more, they're less historical so they're more contemporary pieces, but they would be based partly on sort of people in the inner city.

But really I've done more stories around sort of rural and country towns, connecting up with family there. My main interests though, since, is not - it's as much about people and the people and places, the places are a bit more over-fictional or sort of composites of different inner city locations. So I'm sort of about two thirds of the way through a new collection of short stories called *Common People*.

It's interesting, I just finished a short story - because I'm very intrigued by political rhetoric when Tony Abbott used the term lifestyle choice, remote Aboriginal communities, but often this notion of lifestyle choice for the poor. So my latest story's about, it's called *Lifestyle Choice* and it's about a man who stumbles on a homeless couple and has this sort of interaction with them. So I'm more, I'm more driven to characters on the margins than necessarily place.

It's interesting because *Shadowboxing* is set from the sort of early to mid-1960s to around early 21st century and *Ghost River*, the novel, is set around 1970, give or take a year. But it's interesting my first novel, *Blood*, the one that was shortlisted for a Miles Franklin, while it deals with locations in Melbourne like the sort of the Crown Casino [60:28] precinct a little bit, part of it's set in the sort of northern

suburban Housing Commission estate, it's a much more contemporary novel but it's not certainly one drawing on any history of mine.

So that would be a good example where I can't recognise any personal experience in that novel but certainly recognise characteristics of upbringing. So people often, as you would know Hilary, get the wrong impression when they think about what's autobiographical. *Blood* is intensely autobiographical in an intellectual and emotional sense, but not just pooling stories of your life. So the thing about that novel which is very personal is that it's a brother and sister sort of get cut adrift and to what extent they can survive those processes.

That rings bells with me about, again, the tenacity of kids growing up in the inner city but it's a different experience. I do think that as much as people think you can, again, be romantic is that that generation of kids I know are incredibly resilient. All the kids I went to Richmond with, you had people, where are they now? I would've thought people would be in gaol, dead, drug addicts. Everyone, relatively, has a great mix of being a bit cheeky but also mostly just grandparents with kids, and they've all survived that process.

I think what happens is that it makes you - like and not their fault, I have four daughters. My two younger daughters who are 18 and 20 are incredibly naïve in some ways, because they've had a very safe existence in the inner city, all their friends are really nice and the boys in their life are nice boys. Because my wife who grew up in England, if we go to a family party which can still get a bit [willy], because I don't drink alcohol, I say look if I say we're going, we're going. She goes, why? I said, because I know it's time to go.

A couple of times, not so much in recent years, 10 years ago, I said come on, we're going. Why, I'm just having a good time? We're going. Then someone would ring up the next day and before she tells me I'll be able to tell her who had a fight, what time they had

[62:36]

it and why. She goes, how do you know that? I go, I just know, you can - so you get that inbuilt sense of safety. But on the positive side you don't get unnecessarily anxious at the same time.

So that I've always had good rapport - and it comes out in my work - I have good rapport with people who live on the street. I'm not afraid of mad people, there's

enough mad people in my family to get used to. So I don't have that anxiety and I feel relatively safe about not, you know I can protect myself, but avoiding conflict. I think that…

I mean that's something you learn by experience. So when you were in the pub selling papers as a kid you've either got to work that stuff out or you're going to get ripped off. So we were really sort of conscious of that. My older sister Deborah who is probably the toughest of the children in my family, she's like an anchor. She holds the whole family together and that is the same thing she did as a kid, of knowing…

Facilitator: Yeah, and what your mother did… and what your grandmother did.

Tony Birch: Yeah, although… it's interesting, I think my sister, there's something different about my sister which is even tougher than that. I think partly it's that my mother and grandmother both grew up in the era where you put up with more from men, because there wasn't a choice. Whereas my sister would never put up with it from the men in her life or her, would never let her children and sons behave that way, and I think that's the difference.

In my second book which is [up/not] *Father's Day*, there's a story *How Sweet the Sound* which is about a girl singing a song at a family party and she's got a bruise where her boyfriend has whacked her. I mean that's an interesting story because that comes from me thinking well I'm not a violent man, my children know that,

[64:44]

therefore aren't I a great guy. That actually came from being called out by my daughter when she saw this girl at a family function with a bruise and said to me when we left - that girl, someone in my family has punched her, her boyfriend.

My daughter who was about 18 said, why didn't you say something? I said well, it's not my business, and she said what are you talking about it's not your business? She wouldn't talk to me, she said that's - you've got to call them out, it's not good enough for you to pump your own tyres up. I think those changes in [our/their] generation are really strong. So my older sister would be the one to call anyone out in the family who wasn't behaving properly, and even my mum gets a bit anxious about that, because she's not used to that.

I mean the terrible thing about women who are older is that - there's a great line in the John Steinbeck novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, where Ma Joad, they used to

call her the citadel that would never be taken. I think the horrible thing for women of my mother's generation and my grandmother's is that they basically became sort of human shields for their children. So I know that my mother would've taken beltings and put herself between us and my dad. I know that women put themselves between themselves and their husbands.

So there are, often the only way of dealing with it was they would take punishment themselves to save their children and that is terrible, but again it's exactly what you would understand because they didn't have any other choices. There were no places, there was nowhere to go.

Nowhere.

Facilitator: No. Last question, there were places to go in amongst the churches… there was some sort of refuges, which you've interviewed the Sisters of - remind me, up the road there. [66:35]

Tony Birch: Sisters of Mercy or… the [Sisters of the Poor].

Facilitator 2: Yeah, the Indians.

Tony Birch: Well my dad lived there on Gore Street in that…

Facilitator 2: In that white house set right back.

Tony Birch: Yeah. Yeah, he lived there for a while when he was homeless and we always joke with the Little Sisters they are little.

Yeah, the Sisters are little, obviously you can't join unless you're over five foot, we used to say, because they are very little. But that's interesting now because there's something else about the churches there that is really important to note. One is that we used to go to the Brotherhood of St Laurence all the time because they had that after school program. Now they're Protestant but…

Facilitator: But you were able to go, yeah.

Tony Birch: Able to go. But the other thing with that is it's, what people misunderstand between in the 1960s, it changed in the 1970s but what might be called secular welfarism, or social work and the old charity queens as they used to call them. Because what's interesting is that my mum never felt any anxiety about sending us to the Brotherhood. My mother used to clean the altar at All Saints Church and

she'd get some groceries, we'd go to the House of Welcome, but my mother would have nothing to do with State Welfare.

Her view was that the contract with the churches was clear. Whether it be the Protestants or the Catholics she had a very clear contract, they wanted the souls of your children but they weren't going to take them away. So in other words if you go to after school club, or if you go to - my mum knew as long as we went to Catholic school, we went to mass, that was all the church wanted, they weren't going to

[68:06]

us away. But State Welfare, because State Welfare's relationship with the courts you only had to have a child or a parent charged with neglect, take the kid before the court and if you look now [at those priorities]…

You were a Ward of the State with very little or no evidence. I did a bit of work on state-based welfare and it was much more interventionist. So that my mum, when I asked her - I did ask her this. Because [watching she] - we would leave Sacred Heart after school, we would go up Brunswick Street to the House of Welcome and every day they had a bread line. They would give you a sliced loaf and a fruit loaf and sometimes a bag of bacon bones for pea soup, or something else, maybe something else.

No one…

Facilitator: So the bread was for you kids to eat on the way home from school?

Tony Birch: No, no. …We'd take it home for breakfast the next day. So there was no shame, most kids did it. It was just like pick up the milk, you went and picked up the bread and something else. When she'd go to the church and clean the altar the nun would have - she'd say give me the pram and they'd fill her pram with groceries. I asked her was there any shame in that, she said no, she said I clean the altar I get the groceries. She said if I let a social worker in my house you could be gone the same afternoon.

The other thing about that, which is horrible and I know this is a story of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, very common, that until a few years ago if I would go to my mum's wouldn't matter what - I could never beat her, I could never get there before she vacuumed. So my mum and grandmother had this

habit when they lived in - and my - is that they'd get up every morning, they hose the gutter, they

[69:46]

hose the footpath, they hose the veranda, they vacuum the house right through and then they sit down.

One of my things with my mum, she was out hosing the gutter, I said mum, what are you - it's raining, right? I said, what are you hosing the gutter for? She goes, because I do. Then she went in, she did the rest, she wouldn't talk to me until she'd done the housework. I said mum, why are you doing it? You know what she said? Oh, you never know when a social worker's going to come through your house. I said to her, I said mum one is they can't do that anymore, and two is there are no kids here. Who are they going to take away? But you just keep doing it.

I remember there's Coral Edwards who did a book on stolen generations, similar with Aboriginal women she'd interviewed of Aboriginal women when they were older of getting out of institutions, finally getting into the community and then going into communal care in Aboriginal aged care homes. They would start doing dusting and cleaning.

They'd say what are you doing? You don't have to clean. They didn't understand that if they went into an institution they didn't have to clean it. So they'd spend their lives just cleaning. So those sort of things women never get over. Interestingly I did a piece of research on Fitzroy and these different organisations and comparing the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Oswald Barnett and State Welfare. It's quite interesting that Gerard Tucker who ran the Brotherhood was the most openly sort of judgemental about people, but he was just a propagandist to get money.

Whereas the people coming out of Melbourne University Social Work School, coming out from the mid-1940s onwards, when you go through the material, although it has a rhetoric or sort of secular

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scientific welfare it all falls back on judgement and the sort of courts are always a good backstop. The thing that I discovered - and I read every case file for Fitzroy from 1942 to 1966 and it was about 400.

So I read all of them, so it was very considered research. I mean there were two worst categories is a woman who smoked, if you open the door smoking the social worker goes [unclear] [what do you want]? You're gone, and if you're a migrant who raised your voice because - and the really scary thing for men is that clearly you can sense frustration, is that they would have men Italian and Greek men referred to [Royal Park] for the observation clinic, which is the psychiatric unit and men would hate…

Facilitator: Yeah, because they'd raise their voice?

Tony Birch: Yeah, because they'd call… They'd call them irrational and pathological.

Facilitator 2: I don't know whether you need to get angry because if Italians speak they speak loudly.

Tony Birch: Yeah, that's right….[It's just normal] … Yeah. So it was something that people had to be really on guard about. But it's interesting, Hilary, because I gave that paper again in the History Department and people were saying oh why, you must be being selective. This is not charity, this is not some money-centric thing. They couldn't get their head around it. I said well look, I've got 400 cases…

…I'll [show] you my notes. [73:03]

Facilitator: It is charity, it still is that kind of charity, isn't it? Them and us stuff.

Tony Birch: Yeah, and it's that… Well the client relationship is an interesting one for poor people living in Fitzroy and living in the City is that you're a client until you start to misbehave and then you're a problem. So if you we're compliant you were treated - but as soon as you don't comply. Like social workers come to your house, they say oh look you shouldn't have the kitchen table here, you should have it - and they'd try and move people's furniture around and they'd say no.

Then the woman would say no, I like the table here and that would just be enough to set off a relationship which became more… adversarial. Then they'd say oh maybe we better get someone to look at what's happening to these kids at school and, mm. So you'd have to be like my mum who said feed them bullshit. Yeah just sour, yeah.

Facilitator: Just say whatever they want to hear, I'm just going to make sure Tony's out there to do your photo so.

Tony Birch: Yeah, just whatever they want to hear.

Facilitator 2: If they say pigs fly agree with them. … Look at that little porker up there.

Tony Birch: Yeah, and they go oh yeah, okay.

Yeah, it's one of those things that the whole post-welfare state is a very complex thing and some very good things came out of it. But the thing around sort of state citizenship is about compliance. Again, for women if you had a patriarchal head who was seen to control his family, again, like social workers would say oh, this woman is obviously a difficult person. She may have alcohol problems, she smokes, she was barefoot, but the husband is a regular [74:39]

factory worker and I've talked to him and he said he'll keep her, basically he'll keep her in line.

So if you've got a head of the house who's a man and he's working… he's like the proxy… head of state, phew. So for women living with a really abusive or just authoritarian husband and look, standing over her kids, you could be - people might say oh, he'll do our job for us. He's our little Robert Menzies.

Facilitator: On that note we will stop. [Laughs] Terrific interview, absolutely. That was beautiful.

END OF TRANSCRIPT