

2011

THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURE

A demanding and uncertain adventure

Exploration of a concern for Earth
restoration and how we must live to
pass on to our children – and their
children, and all living things – an
Earth restored



THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURES

The lectures were instituted by Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) on its establishment in 1964.

They are named after James Backhouse who, with his companion, George Washington Walker, visited Australia from 1832 to 1838. They travelled widely, but spent most of their time in Tasmania. It was through their visit that Quaker Meetings were first established in Australia.

Coming to Australia under a concern for the conditions of convicts, the two men had access to people with authority in the young colonies, and with influence in Britain, both in Parliament and in the social reform movement. In meticulous reports and personal letters, they made practical suggestions and urged legislative action on penal reform, on the rum trade, and on land rights and the treatment of Aborigines.

James Backhouse was a general naturalist and a botanist. He made careful observations and published full accounts of what he saw, in addition to encouraging Friends in the colonies and following the deep concern that had brought him to Australia.

Australian Friends hope that this series of Lectures will bring fresh insights into the Truth, and speak to the needs and aspirations of Australian Quakerism. This particular lecture was delivered at The Innovations Centre adjoining Wollongong East Campus, New South Wales in January 2011.

Maxine Cooper

Presiding Clerk

Australia Yearly Meeting



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About the author



Rosemary (Rowe) Morrow was born in Perth and grew up close to the Swan River and fell asleep at night to the sounds of lions roaring at the Perth Zoo. She ran away many times before she was five years old, mainly to see animals, such as a friend's goat or cow. And she has travelled with her work ever since. By eleven years old she was convinced that her life would be lived out in the very remote Outback. Well it wasn't, but from 16 to 21 years old she lived in the Kimberleys on the edge of the Tanami Desert where space, sand, sky and silence became lifelong values/necessities. Her friendships with Aboriginal Australians started then and have continued all her life.

Returning to Sydney she studied agriculture mistaking it for land care. Observant of Earth processes, Rowe grew aware and then alarmed by the rapid disintegration of Earth's ecosystems. She grieves for a damaged Earth; for every tree carelessly removed and every visible or invisible organism lost to extinction.

She trained in humanitarian work in France where she also lived in Trosly-Breuil l'Arche community, and in England at Jordan's where she knew she would become a Quaker. Most of the 1970s were spent in Lesotho. Back in Australia in the 1980s permaculture provided the powerful

basis for Earth restoration. A concern was born. She considers permaculture 'sacred' knowledge to be carried and shared with others. Since then she has travelled to meet many people anxious and concerned to restore their environments.

As a teacher of permaculture Rowe has been inspired for many years by Parker Palmer, the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) and non-violent resistance. She works in difficult places choosing people who have been disempowered and who would not otherwise have access to permaculture.

As an isolated Friend Rowe sits quietly on Sundays and joins spiritually with another Quaker meeting somewhere in the world on the same longitude. She joined Friends at the Devonshire Street Meeting and then the Blue Mountains where she made her home for many years. Being a lover of science she finds depths and challenges in Quakerism in the modern world of the 21st century, and particularly values the Quaker embrace of, and struggle with, continuing revelation.

Acknowledgements

This year of writing the Backhouse Lecture was a difficult one for me – more like an obstacle course than a smooth walk. It took some time to get the themes clear and when I did, personal family challenges intervened. It was a stop-go process and when I stopped or needed to start, there was always someone standing by with a prop and reassurance.

Past Backhouse lecturers reached out. Thank you David Johnston, Helen Gould and Helen Bayes for phone calls and assurances. And Sue Ennis introduced me to Parker Palmer and bought me all his books. How can I say thank you for that?

Of my writing group in Katoomba, Alison Gentle and Robyne Reichel read ill-prepared manuscripts and gave sound advice. Lis Bastion offered ideas and lead me to Penny. Elizabeth Kwan in Darwin took time from her demanding schedule to read and comment on one draft. James Strong sent wonderful emails and made me think. He generously provided the strong Quaker background enabling me to stretch my spirit and mind with confidence. The Backhouse Committee phoned me and Dale Hess was at the end of the phone or supportive email.

I live in happy obligation to all these people and thank them for their contributions. Their emotional and spiritual contributions were as great as the intellectual. And for those others by whom I have been delighted and provoked in our conversations, you are there on every page and I thank you as well and I am sorry not to give your names.

I dedicate this lecture to a beloved nephew, Michael, who loved all things living and would have been supportive and challenged by these times and this lecture.

Rosemary Morrow

November 2010

Introduction

A Letter to James Backhouse

Home

2nd Day, 4th month, 2010

Dear James Backhouse:

I am sorry that there is such a distance between us and we can't talk. But it is 179 years since you arrived in Australia and I have been asked to deliver the James Backhouse Lecture for the Australia Yearly Meeting in 2011. The world today is vastly changed yet you are a forebear and we share much in common and would have many things to talk about.

Are you gratified that an annual lecture commemorates your travelling under concern for convicts, Aboriginal people and the souls of women and men? Since its inauguration in 1964 there have been inspiring lectures.

I went to the Australian National Library (ANL) in Canberra, our national capital, to read your narratives of your travels in Australia, South Africa and Norway.

A librarian told me that I needed to read in a special room. I ordered your books and sat down. It was so quiet. I sat and breathed in and relaxed because my life had been very stressful.

The silence descended. I sat. They brought me a pencil, a pair of white cotton gloves and a soft cradle to put your books on so they wouldn't be damaged. I started to read. I turned the pages slowly and gradually my imagination moved into your life and times.

I started 'doing research' and finished after three days, sitting back in my chair and knowing that I had made a friend for life. I felt comforted that some one else had known what it is to lead a life of travelling under concern. But what I had gone to your writings for – enlightenment about what a nurseryman and horticulturist of your times might say about Creation – was barely there.

But I found other riches.

James, you wrote much in your narratives that I, too, experienced over 20 or so years of travelling under concern. Some are trifling, such as the

necessity of always having a handkerchief, and choosing to walk rather than accept other transport; and some are devastating, such as human brutality and despair.

And, perhaps it is a small thing, but you always called your concern ‘your work’ and I too, naturally used those words. Travelling under concern has been ‘my work’.

I felt close to you because of the points of congruence in our lives. I thought: here is someone who knows what it is like to travel under concern for long periods of time, to places where people are kind but don’t know you, and often are sceptical of your concern. Despite the time gap, the commonalities are greater than the differences especially where it touches on Quakerism.

Our first shared experience is that concerns are multi-faceted and interlinked. Your primary concerns flowed over to other inter-related issues such as food supplies, hunger and cruelty to animals. Our common ground covers:

- professions in agriculture and horticulture
- reading nature in three dimensions
- concern for justice and compassion for prisoners and Aborigines
- attention to food and hunger wherever it occurs
- caring how underprivileged people are treated
- abiding interest in education, especially orphans, adult education and science
- loneliness while travelling
- family tragedy
- religious beliefs tested and modified by suffering and evil
- sometimes despair and outrage at barbarous acts by humans.
- Finally, we hold to Quaker practice and testimonies.

I have followed a singular path of concern for food, water and Earth repair, since realising in the mid-1980s that we are living lives of great risk because we are at the peak of Earth non-renewable resources such as fresh water, food, forests, and soil. My concern was possible because of a 20th

century concept called permaculture, and the teaching and work of adult educators and the Alternatives to Violence Project.

I explore how implementing permaculture resolves many questions of development and problems of global warming. In projects first offered in Vietnam and Cambodia I did not know, and nor did Quaker Service Australia (QSA), that permaculture would be more than re-establishing food supplies for starving people. Permaculture, as more than gardening, proved to be a physical and social healer restoring peace, food, culture and self-respect to damaged people and landscapes. It provided a remembering of how to live again.

This lecture is about the Earth we share, how we live in it and where the Spirit is. We inherit many views about God and Nature, some strongly conservative, some revelatory and some contribute to the crisis we are in. Now in 2011, under pressure from science and psychology Earth theology has substantially changed.

By the end of the 20th century, many people's understanding, supported by science and theology, that Earth is on the brink of collapse came together with a new spiritual universe story, and gave to humans a great work – to restore Earth's ecosystems and biodiversity.

The Earth is in crisis but, in Australia, now a country of great wealth and luxury, we don't feel it pressingly yet. I think it would be hard for you to see much of the destruction. It is painful for me.

I found Earth-sustainable principles in five traditional cultures. There are no technical impediments to Earth restoration except human willingness that now would require considerable sacrifices such as:

- living frugally
- building peaceful communities
- putting Earth's web of relationships at the heart of restoration.

So you see, at the centre is a spiritual view of life as sacred.

As a sub-theme I looked at the impact of Quakers and the impact on Quakers. I think that Quakers, if they wanted to, could model sustainable living on Earth.

It is late, nearly midnight, and the wind is spitting big drops of rain on my tin roof and then pauses to take breath and starts again. Other than that the

world is very quiet.

James Backhouse, thank you for walking with me on this rocky path over the last months. I was baffled until I read your journal and discovered a soul mate. We have many differences but our concerns are for things that are eternal. It has been good to write to you.

There are challenging times with difficult questions and huge changes ahead.

In peace, friendship and gratitude,

Your Friend,

Rosemary (Rowe) Morrow

P.S. By the way, you are still spoken of today. A neighbour, sent me this:

This morning on local radio I heard a local historian talking about a James Backhouse, a Quaker who went over the Blue Mountains in the 1830s to Bathurst. A couple of weeks later when returning through Richmond he mentioned having been to Bathurst to an Aboriginal man, who told him he already knew that he, Backhouse, had been there spreading the word. When Backhouse asked him what the message had been he was told 'God Almighty sat down at Bathurst'.¹

¹ Shirley Brown in an email of 5th day, sixth month, 2009

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