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## Bingil Bay Bastard

From a “pinch of guilt” emerges a fine-grained biography of a bohemian figure  
during a vital period of environmental activism

[Morag Fraser](#)

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“Intriguing environmentalist”: self-portrait by John Búst, painted on Bedarra Island. *Portrait, with photo by Liz Gallie, presented by Margaret Thorsbourne AO to Friends of Ninney Rise, Bingil Bay*

Iain McCalman begins [\*John Büssst: Bohemian Artist and Saviour of Reef and Rainforest\*](#), his account of another man's heroic environmental activism, by inserting himself artfully into his introductory narrative. Here, he is the historian who missed something when he was writing *The Reef*, his acclaimed "passionate history" of the Great Barrier Reef, a decade ago.

Humility is always attractive, and as McCalman recounts his stumbling, against local advice and "with typical male arrogance," down a precipitous path in Mission Beach to view a plaque dedicated to a man called John Büssst, he has already drawn his readers into a journey of discovery. He wants to know more about John Büssst, and so do we.

The plaque, metal affixed to a granite rock, patinaed by wind and salt spray, bore the words of poet Judith Wright: IN MEMORY OF JOHN H BÜSST. DIED 5-4-1971. ARTIST AND LOVER OF BEAUTY WHO FOUGHT THAT MAN AND NATURE MIGHT SURVIVE.

When first she came into contact with Büssst, Judith Wright was famed for both her poetry and her environmental advocacy. Büssst was a sometime artist, knockabout builder and campaigner — or at least that was her early impression. And so was it Iain McCalman's when he wrote *The Reef*. His book included a chapter on the "intriguing environmentalist" and his efforts to save the Reef, but now, ten years later, McCalman admits that:

I felt a pinch of guilt because my chapter in *The Reef*, like several other accounts, tended to represent John as a less significant figure than his two university-educated friends, Judith Wright and Len Webb. I'd been dazzled by her genius as a poet-philosopher and his pioneering achievements as a forestry scientist. By comparison, the cheeky Bingil Bay Bastard seemed a less serious figure.

Judith Wright had taken the true measure of the man decades earlier, and, with her colleagues at the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, came to extol Büssst as "our indispensable spokesman, contact with politicians, diplomat and tactician, as well as friend." She also recognised something else in him: a profound sense of the interconnectedness of nature and the human instinct for beauty. Her memorial inscription for Büssst was intentional and apt: "Artist and lover of beauty who fought that man and nature might survive."

So what was John Büssst's background, where did he learn to build, what ignited his environmental passion, and what linked him so usefully with politicians? And how did he earn that "Bingil Bay Bastard" moniker?

In 2014 McCalman asked such questions of two Queensland activist-friends, Liz Gallie and Sandal Hayes. The pair (to whom this book is dedicated) had invited him to Bingil Beach, one of the four villages that make up the coastal town of Mission Beach, to help explore and publicise Büssst and his wife Alison's "environmental struggles and heritage homestead."

In conversation, Gallie and Hayes turned the questions back on McCalman and his hazarded descriptions of Büssst: if he were just "a bush larrikin" then "how did such an obvious bohemian manage to persuade some of the world's most famous scientists and marine biologists to take up his suggestions?" And "how did this dropout island artist manage to persuade at least three prime ministers, as well as several others still in the making, to join him in saving Australia's rainforests and coral reefs?"

How indeed. McCalman's reader's curiosity gets a further spur — into outrage — when he drops in the startling detail that Büssst had "prevented the Australian Army from destroying large areas of rainforest in order to test destructive Vietnam war defoliants like Agent Orange." The annoyed army officers dubbed him the Bingil Bay Bastard, a badge he adopted with pride.

The final lure set by McCalman is his mini-sketch of himself as serially deceived by his own presumptions. His own background (colonial-era Central Africa) had led him to conceive of dry, quiet-voiced Büssst as a “pukka sahib swilling pink gins.” Wrong! A later incarnation of McCalman himself — as an Australian “hippy-style mud-brick builder” — has him imagining Büssst as a “young builder-craftsman... working on a medieval-style artists’ village in 1930s Victoria.” True and necessary bits of background information, but not sufficient.

What follows is a detailed account of Büssst’s evolution and McCalman’s enlightenment. For us readers it is an exciting but cautionary tale, for we learn (if we didn’t know already) that — despite the heroic efforts of a generation of activists like Büssst and writer-campaigners like Wright and, later, McCalman — Australia’s unique, interacting systems of rainforest and reef are threatened again, this time by our head-in-the-sand failure to acknowledge and respond effectively to anthropogenic climate change.

Reading McCalman’s compressed and lively history, I was reminded of the exuberant sketchbooks of Eugene von Guérard, the Austrian-born artist who came to the Victorian goldfields in 1852 and left, not with gold, but with a legacy of vivid, acutely observed drawings of daily life in a social melting pot. Australia got into von Guérard’s eyes, just as the Queensland forests, coastline and reefs would sharpen the ecological and aesthetic perceptions of John Büssst. And though a century-and-a-half separates the artist-observer von Guérard from the historian-writer Iain McCalman, the two men share a related gift for visualised narrative and indicative vignettes.

John Horatio Büssst was born in Bendigo, north of Melbourne, to ambitious, prosperous Catholic parents, Horatio and “Dolly” (Emily). Over the summer of 1929–30, he and his older sister and close companion Phyllis (Phyl) abandoned their Melbourne University courses (and potential careers in law and medicine). Their sudden swerve away from Catholic upward social mobility horrified their parents and severed the family connection for years. But the parents kept paying the children an allowance, and this came to matter for more reasons than their comfortable survival.

The scandal of John and Phyl’s dropping out was exacerbated by their choice of alternative way of life: they joined Scottish-born Max Meldrum, combative leader of the tonal-painting school of “Meldrumites” and epitome of Melbourne’s artistic Bohemia. McCalman is clearly invested in this early part of Büssst’s life: his book’s subtitle is “bohemian artist” followed by “saviour of reef and rainforest.” So it is unsurprising that he devotes a quarter of the book to Büssst’s involvement with the Meldrum school and two of its most famous adherents, Colin Colahan and Justus Jörgensen.

For all the apparent rupture, there are continuities. Charismatic Colin Colahan, was, like John and Phyl, privately schooled (at Xavier College), and like Phyl had given up a medical degree. His parents, like the Büsssts’, were Catholic establishment, his father a surgeon-general. By the time John and Phyl fell under his sway, he was an influential and successful artist, and his promotion of careful observation of nature as a route to becoming a good painter appealed to their youthful romanticism.

But the times were awry. McCalman is clear-sighted about bohemian myths and well-informed about the pending calamities. In November 1930 one of Colahan’s lovers, the ambitious young writer Mollie Dean, was murdered. McCalman acknowledges Gideon Haigh’s “fine” account of Molly Dean’s life ([Scandal in Bohemia](#), Penguin, 2018) and the cascading consequences of her death. Against the background of the Great Depression and the unsolved murder case (Colahan was briefly suspected but exonerated), the close-knit bohemian group dispersed. A central figure, the painter [Clarice Beckett](#), died; Colahan and others moved to Europe.

Among those who stayed, of course, were Justus Jørgensen and his wife Lily. In 1934 Lily bought a large sloping Eltham block with glorious western light, and persuaded her husband to move there. Some of his students followed, and so began the building of the colony that was to become Montsalvat, a name proposed, almost in jest, by the aspirant writer/painter, bountiful cook, and daughter of the Belgian consul, Sue Vanderkelen.

It was at the emerging artists' colony that John Būsst discovered and developed his talent for building, designing, stonemasonry, blacksmithing, pisé and mud-brick construction. The "hippy-style mud-brick builder" in Iain McCalman shines through this "Montsalvat Builder" chapter, and if there is perhaps more detail of life, building, loves and art on the Eltham Hill than is strictly necessary, I am not one to complain. (Full disclosure: our family home — since 1972 — is made of mud-brick, and from 2007 to 2018 I chaired the governing board of Montsalvat.)

What is particularly gratifying about McCalman's account of those early years is that he gives full credit to the artisan-workers who did the hard labour, improvised and learned on the job, the women (Sonia Skipper notably) no less than the men, without downplaying Jørgensen's leadership or his keen eye for design and visual placement. I should add that we know about the contributions of that skilled and diverse group of people largely because Justus Jørgensen's architect-nephew, the late Michael Jorgensen (1931–2017) publicised them in the many books he produced through his Blackjack Press.

But utopias have the seeds of their own disintegration sown in them, and Montsalvat was no exception. McCalman notes that Jørgensen's "blunt authoritarianism" had begun to alienate some of his supporters. In 1939, the Būssts met a much-lauded new artist-visitor to the Victorian artists' colony, Noel Wood, full of alluring tales of the tropical island paradise that had inspired the paintings in his recent Sydney and Melbourne exhibitions.

John and Phyl were tempted, and their father Horatio's death in 1940 provided the means. While waiting for his estate to be settled, they visited Wood on his Bedarra Island. Jørgensen waged "a titanic fight" against their leaving Montsalvat, insisting it would lead to their "disillusion, loss of ability to paint, and general moral decline." It would also stymie Jørgensen's financial expectations.

They left, taking their (somewhat modified) inheritance with them. To his credit (and perhaps as a portent of the diplomacy he would come to exercise in environmental battles), Būsst retained an affection and appreciation for Jørgensen, the man he called "Norway."

But out of the frying pan... The island idyll Noel Wood had projected soon dissolved in rancour after Wood introduced and then expelled a number of artists and aspirant colony members. The story of painter Roy Delgado's abrupt eviction from the island is one of the book's most poignant episodes. Būsst maintained sufficient independence to allow him to stay and build — at a distance — a grand, wide-verandahed mud-brick house for himself and Phyl. Although he was a slight man his building feats were formidable, and McCalman's descriptions are so detailed you're tempted to think you could almost build the house yourself.

With time on his hands, Būsst met and befriended Len Webb, then a twenty-five-year-old forester. The young working-class scientist lit in Būsst an admiration and an accompanying fascination with Webb's researches into medical alkaloids and their presence in Australia's remnant tropical rainforests. Webb also introduced Būsst to "the ancient empirical traditions of Australian Aboriginal peoples... derived from hundreds of years of practising an effective naturalist code of 'eat, die and learn.'" Aboriginal knowledge, and presence — as teachers, as knowledge founts, appreciated but also ignored — runs through the book like a seam of gold-bearing quartz.

For Büssst, Webb's forest researches forged the link between his own aesthetic concerns ("lover of beauty") and ecological science. In Len he also found a soul mate. They traded knowledge, rampaged through philosophical debates, drank rum, read Tennyson (aloud) and played Wagner.

In 1947, another piece of John Büssst's past slotted into his present. As a schoolboy at Wesley he'd become best friends with a young Harold Holt. Now a rapidly rising Liberal politician, "Harry," with his wife Zara, visited the Büsssts at Bedarra, the first of many, rapturous sojourns. Holt became a "fanatical skindiver."

Phyl, meanwhile, jaded by paradise, moved back to Melbourne and commissioned a mud-brick house from Alistair Knox, only the second such from the man who was to become the mud-brick maestro.

John, missing his close companion and sister acutely, sought consolation in a return to painting. Holt exerted his considerable influence to arrange and promote an exhibition in Melbourne for his friend. While not every critic embraced Büssst as "The Modern Gauguin," the experience, attendant publicity and reincorporation into Melbourne society did much to restore Büssst's zest and confidence. He announced his engagement to Alison Shaw Fitchett, daughter of a prominent solicitor (McCalman infers some Holt "love-matching"). A quiet "but elegant" wedding at St Monica's Cathedral in Cairns soon followed.

The couple were clearly well-suited. "Ali" slipped readily into island life and environmental activism, and was a willing partner when the decision was made to move from Bedarra and build another homestead at Bingil Bay on the mainland.

They also became increasingly involved in the classification and protection of Australian rainforests. Triggered by Webb, Büssst had what McCalman describes as "something akin to a conversion that deeply penetrated and transformed his psyche." A journalist visiting the Büsssts some years later noticed "something inexorable" in John's personality. He seemed "at once a man of emotion and a wickedly cool organiser."

The "wickedly cool organiser" was to go on to become one of Australia's most effective and dogged environmental campaigners, loving the beauty and understanding the interdependence of the great ecosystems of forest and reef in which he felt privileged to live. He was adept at lobbying and leveraging his political connections, resourceful and tireless in his investigations and advocacy. And heedless of personal cost — little wonder he died, too early, at the age of seventy-one.

McCalman's "pinch of guilt" has produced a fine-grained history of a crucial period of environmental activism, and a fascinating portrait of a man who was no plaster saint but whose strategic blend of aesthetics and ecological enterprise we might do well to emulate. •

### [John Büssst: Bohemian Artist and Saviour of Reef and Rainforest](#)

By Iain McCalman | *NewSouth* | \$36.99 | 272 pages