

**IN** *review*

## The power of one: Champion of the reef remembered

John Bússt was ahead of his time in his efforts to save the environment and the Great Barrier Reef, as a new book explains

Written by [Ken Haley](#)



John Bússt was an unsung Australian hero. Born into affluence, he became a university dropout when such a move had the power to shock. He also became a member of Melbourne's avant-garde art scene in the 1930s in the middle of the Great Depression.

But it was as what would later be called a networker – using his contacts in the halls of power – that he inscribed himself into our unbuilt national pantheon through a visionary campaign to save the world's largest structure – the Great Barrier Reef – for posterity.

Did someone say unsung? Not anymore. Iain McCalman has produced a worthy tribute to this larrikin whose passion for the environment stood in odd contrast to a coolness and tactical genius that enabled him to outmanoeuvre the “drill, baby, drill” crowd of his day.

I almost typed “of his bay” there, and no typo could be truer. Aware of how irritating he was to those used to getting their way, he christened himself the Bingil Bay Bastard and clearly relished every battle, but was emphatically not ego-driven. Those who admired him included the poet Judith Wright, who became a loyal friend, and conservationist Vincent Serventy.

Rarely encountering a character more commanding than his own, when Büssst did – in the person of Justus Jorgensen, for whom Büssst played a key role in building his artists’ haven of Montsalvat on Melbourne’s eastern edge – our hero found the strength to walk away when Jorgensen had become a control freak. In fact, Büssst moved 2000km to North Queensland.

Wisely, as his subject managed to jam several full lives into his cancer-curtailed 61 years, McCalman breaks his story into distinct parts. In the first, young John falls in with Max Meldrum’s art school in Melbourne.

Montsalvat, where Büssst learnt the useful art of mudstone construction, was the first of three artist colonies that would give ample scope to his creative side. The happy coexistence of that creativity alongside astonishing practicality and a willingness to use the clublike nature of the establishment to subvert its own pro-growth premises, is what makes Büssst extraordinary.

Bedarra Island became the second artist colony, the paradise location near Innisfail, which came recommended by Montsalvat visitor Noel Wood, fresh from a Sydney exhibition of his tropic-themed paintings.

The colony they founded there – with plot twists familiar to anyone who’s studied the fate of Utopias brought down to earth – was idyllic until the co-founders fell out. But, more significantly, an old university crony, Harold Holt, with his girlfriend then later wife Zara, became perennial visitors.

In 1950, the year the Holts organised Büssst’s first public art exhibition, in Melbourne, he announced his engagement to Alison (Ali), younger daughter of a well-heeled solicitor from Victoria’s Western District. Büssst’s destiny received its impetus after the young marrieds moved to the mainland – to Bingil Bay, halfway between Townsville and Cairns.

In 1963 Dr Len Webb, an ecologist before the term gained currency, tipped Büssst off that the army was using a patch of rainforest to test Agent Orange’s capacity to denude a country of forests (with one eye on the jungles of South Vietnam).

Horrified, Büssst responded by appointing himself president, and Ali secretary, of the Tropical Rainforest Preservation Committee which, apart from them, didn’t actually exist.

Webb was for polite petitioning but Büssst had learnt one thing from his father – if you have a case to make, start at the top and work your way down.

Soon, a letter of his “committee” had brought the issue to the desk of High Court Chief Justice Sir Garfield Barwick, in his capacity as head of the kittenish Australian Conservation Foundation. The Bingil Bay Bastard was reaching for the stars.

Late that year the campaigner sent Holt – now Prime Minister – a draft letter to Prince Phillip, head of the equally tame World Wildlife Fund, with a note asking his old mate “to assess whether this letter was within the bounds of royal etiquette”.

Holt didn't bother the Palace, but he did get his government wheels in a spin. So the use of Agent Orange on that precious land was ruled out and forested Clump Mountain, within sight of the Büssst's residence, was declared a national park.

Whatever they say about the wicked, there's no less rest for the virtuous, because in September 1967 a wealthy local canegrower applied to dredge 34 hectares of coral from Ellison Reef, where the rainforest meets the reef off the Innisfail coast.

Every David has his Goliath. Büssst's was the chairman of the Great Barrier Reef Committee, who supported its "controlled exploitation". Once it could be demonstrated to someone in authority that even a "dead coral reef" can be teeming with living polyps, the triple-B slingshot was looking like a pretty powerful weapon.

In the middle of the case, Büssst was in Canberra where he was a houseguest at The Lodge. While Holt, caught up in the toils of being PM, was unable to spare him face time, those spinning wheels they had set in motion were now propelling their cause to an irresistible conclusion. On December 8, 1967, nine days before Holt went into the water off Portsea, the mining warden ruled out mining on the reef.

In late 1968 – newly advised he had throat cancer – Büssst talked the ACF into pushing Canberra to assume sovereignty over the reef, overriding Queensland's veto. A follow-up letter secured Gough Whitlam's backing and another, to ACTU president Bob Hawke, brought the unions on side.

Before the 1969 federal election Bjelke-Petersen, aware that for once he was on a loser, "grudgingly agreed to John Gorton's offer for Queensland to join a Commonwealth-State Commission of Inquiry" – later upgraded to a Royal Commission – on petroleum drilling.