



## AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

STUDY GUIDE  
BRENDAN BERECRY

# JACK MUNDEY

SERIES 8

(1929-) Unionist and Environmentalist

### INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of *Australian Biography* (Series 8) produced by the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories - of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

### SYNOPSIS

Jack Munday became a national figure in the early 1970s when as Secretary of the NSW Branch of the Builders' Labourers Federation (BLF), he led the union's famous 'green bans'. This extraordinary

conservation campaign redefined the development of Australia's major cities.

The BLF refused to work on developments thought to be destructive of the environment or requiring the demolition of buildings considered part of our social heritage.

*In the 1970s he was a leader in the fight to preserve such significant sites as Sydney's historic Rocks area*

ABOVE: JACK MUNDEY IN 2001



man to play rugby league, he joined the Communist Party.

Since then, political activism has been the focus of his life, despite setbacks and personal tragedies. Jack talks about the corrupt forces within the BLF that eventually destroyed his leadership, the sudden death of his first wife and later his son, and his hopes that the modern era of economic rationalism and corporatization will return again to values of fairness and compassion.

#### CURRICULUM LINKS

This episode of this series of the Australian Biography project is an excellent teaching resource for middle to senior secondary school and tertiary students. It is particularly relevant to:

- History
- Geography
- Political Studies
- Studies of Society and Environment
- English

#### BEFORE WATCHING

The issues discussed in this episode highlight themes concerned with the power of collective community action to exert control over the quality of future living spaces. This episode is also an exercise in oral history in which a principal participant in a political movement of ongoing national significance, namely Jack Munday, is given a platform by Robin Hughes's questions to detail his perspective on the historic events he helped shape.

Under Jack's guidance, they joined with local communities to preserve such significant sites as Sydney's historic Rocks area, Centennial Park, Victoria Street in Kings Cross and the last stretch of public bushland on the Parramatta River.

As a crusading unionist, Jack also fought for safety reforms on building sites and, from the 1960s, helped usher in a new era of union activism for wider social issues, from feminism and gay liberation to land

rights and international politics.

In this interview, Jack reflects on his life-long commitment to social justice. Born in 1929 on a poor dairy farm in far north Queensland, Jack's early life was shaped by the death of his mother when he was six. The family of five children was split up, and Jack spent much of his remaining childhood with his father, an early influence on his later politics and social values. Arriving in Sydney as a young

Munday responds to Hughes's questions largely through the use of personal anecdotes. These in effect highlight for the audience the individual motivations behind the struggles of the time. This personal form of direct storytelling and oral history also presents us with a picture of the personal satisfactions and disappointments held by Munday towards the eventual outcomes of the green-ban movement. His reflections offer the audience a guide for the environmental decisions of the future.

## BACKGROUND

The background to the green-ban struggles is the story of the destruction of Australia's major cities in the 1960s and early 1970s. Vast amounts of money were poured into property development of a predominately commercial and speculative nature and valuable old buildings and areas of affordable housing were often destroyed in the process.

The BLF under Jack Munday's leadership insisted these development priorities be reversed, that the preservation of open community space and heritage buildings as well as the construction of more affordable flats and houses was more important than piling up empty or under-used commercial office buildings.

Beginning in 1971 with the first successful BLF assisted community action to stop the development of an area called Kelly's Bush in Sydney, the anti-development campaign that followed throughout Australia maintained that all building work performed should be of a socially useful and ecologically benign nature. The bans unions used to achieve this agenda were called green-bans to emphasize the wider community and environmental interest involved. It was also to distinguish them from a black-ban, a union action to protect the economic interests of its own members, which was already viewed by some members of the community in a negative light.

By 1974, 42 green-bans had been imposed by the NSW BLF, holding up well over \$3,000 million worth of development. Over 100 Australian buildings considered by the National Trust to be worthy of pres-

ervation were saved by the green-bans. The green-bans eventually led to the New South Wales government bringing in tighter demolition laws.

In this half hour program, Jack Munday initially talks about some of the areas saved by the green-ban movement in Sydney in particular. These included:

- The Rocks, the birthplace of European Australia, where over three million tourists go each year;
- Centennial Park, which was saved from being turned into a concrete sports stadium;
- the Botanic Gardens, which was saved from becoming a car park to the Opera House;

- Woolloomooloo, saved from \$400 million worth of high-rise commercial buildings, and since proclaimed as a prototype for attractive and useful inner-city redevelopment where a genuine socio-economic mix of residents live in medium-density buildings with trees and landscaped surroundings.

Despite the fact the green-ban campaign was broken from within the ranks of trade unionism, partly due to the New South Wales branch's commitment to limited tenure of office for union officials, Munday argues that the political significance of the green-ban movement was that it demonstrated the potential power of a winning alliance between environmentalists and trade unionists. As 90 per cent



of the population resides in urban areas, Munday still argues that success in preserving the built environment is vital, and the actions he helped instigate showed that trade unionists are especially well placed to influence the construction of the built environment.

#### SETTING THE CONTEXT

Set the context by asking students to:

- discuss what they can recall as changes to the urban environment in their own lifetime.
- talk about the way community members view development in their own locality now.

#### PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDINGS

Prior to viewing this program, students could discuss what they consider to be buildings of heritage value or places of important public space in their community. Questions to focus on include:

- Do you know of any important community actions to preserve these community assets?
- What do you know about Jack Munday and the issues in which he was involved in during the 60s and 70s?

To assist in answering these questions, students could carry out the following activities:

- Access newspaper articles in the local media and local studies collection of the school or community library.
- Visit the local town hall, civic exhibition space or council chambers to examine area development maps.
- Discuss the meaning of the following terms which are used in the program: Socialism, unionism, environmentalism, left-leaning, Communism, Stalinism, Marxism, apartheid, green ban, privatization, deregulation, economic fundamentalism

#### AFTER WATCHING

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

Discussion could focus more generally on how and why Australians have sought to preserve their natural and built heritage.

The following questions raised by the program could direct the discussion at different points and be researched as needed:

- Consider the recollections of Jack Munday about the green bans. What attitudes and values come through in his account of the movement? What other accounts do you think would add to a broader picture of the bans?
- What do you think environmental activism in the 1970s represented to communities threatened by redevelopment? How did people decide what was worth preserving?
- Did the program help you to recognize any attitudes or assumptions that are evident in current heritage and environmental debates?
- Do you know of any green bans still being activated by unions today?

Students could now be prompted to recall the perspective presented by Munday in the program and consider the following questions about the significance of the green ban movement:

- What did the green ban movement stand for? What do you know about the processes that were involved?
- How important was the effectiveness of alliances to the rise and fall of the movement?
- What can the green ban movement tell us about the experience of social change and environmental activism in Australian communities?

Other discussion could focus on issues raised by the nature of Munday's recollection of these past events:

- What can oral history accounts tell us about the role of memory in reconstructing the past?
- Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of oral histories and testimonies.
- What other sources could you ac-

cess to provide further insights into the green ban period?

#### FURTHER ACTIVITIES

The following activities are designed to further develop students' awareness of environmental issues at play in their own community today.

- Attend a local council meeting to observe council arbitration of a development application in dispute.
- Examine local newspapers and community newsletters (environmental group, local historical society, National Trust committee) for a current action in your locality aimed at saving part of the natural or built environment.
- Identify the key stakeholders and consider the opposing arguments in the issue under investigation. What are the main arguments for and against the development?
- Can you identify any links between the current issue and past discussions and actions in your community?
- Invite individuals or group representatives to the school to present their position on the issue. What strategies for advocacy and action are they using? How have they interacted and worked with other community members? What are their predictions about future discussions and actions?
- Prepare a class response to the proposals for the action put forward. This could be published in the local media and copies sent to local government representatives. How do the views of the group differ from those of key stakeholders? In what ways are the ideas similar?

#### FINAL DISCUSSION

Students should by now have had a chance to analyse the ways in which issues are managed and strategic positions are developed in local area politics. In order to reflect on the opportunities for youth to participate in actions at the local government level, the following question could form the basis of a final discussion of the issues raised in the Jack Munday program.

- What strategies would you utilize to ensure young people have a voice in community decisions that impact on the environment and/or local heritage?

## REFERENCES

### BOOKS

Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union: Environmental Activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation*, UNSW Press, 1998.

Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *A History Of The Australian Environment Movement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

Jack Munday, *Green Bans and Beyond*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1981.

### WEB SITES

<http://www.atua.org.au/atua.htm> Australian Trade Union Archives. Listings of archival and heritage sources including the National Library of Australia's Oral History Collection. Use the search function to locate material on Jack Munday and the BLF.

[www.search.org.au](http://www.search.org.au) The Social Education And Research Concerning Humanity Foundation (SEARCH). Promotes greater understanding in the community of the main factors affecting social life and aims to influence social development and advance social well-being.

[www.workers.labor.net.au](http://www.workers.labor.net.au) The Labor Council of NSW. Focuses on industrial issues and publishes the Workers Online newsletter.

[www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au](http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au) A educational heritage web site run with the assistance of the NSW Heritage Office, the Office of the Board of Studies NSW and the NSW Department of Education & Training.

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/subjects/7669178/health-science-and-technology/> Radio National's Earthbeat program. Transcripts of featured programs as well as reference material on a range of issues related to the environment.

<http://ee.environment.gov.au> The Federal Department of Environment and Heritage promotes a national network of information programs, materials and publications in the interests of education for sustainability.

### TAKING ACTION

Below are some organizations to contact when seeking information on community action to protect heritage values.

**The National Trust of Australia** (Centres in each state and territory) [www.nationaltrust.org.au](http://www.nationaltrust.org.au)

**The International Council on Monuments and Sites: ICOMOS International Secretariat**, 49-51 rue de la Fédération -75015 Paris France, Tel: +33 (0)1 4567 6770 Fax: +33 (0)1 4566 0622 [www.icomos.org](http://www.icomos.org)

**Labor Council of NSW: 10th Floor, 377-383 Sussex Street, Sydney NSW 2000.** Telephone: (02) 9264 1691 Fax: (02) 9261 3505 <http://council.labor.net.au>

### TREE-FRIENDLY ASSOCIATIONS

The following associations and groups are committed to the propagation and protection of trees. Most of these groups welcome public support. Local councils also offer advice about tree planting in your local community.

Landcare Australia <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/>

Greening Australia [www.greeningaustralia.org.au](http://www.greeningaustralia.org.au)

The Men of the Trees [www.menofthetrees.com.au](http://www.menofthetrees.com.au)

Planet Ark [www.planetark.org](http://www.planetark.org)

**Australian Biography: Jack Munday**  
A Film Australia National Interest Program  
**Director/Producer:** Robin Hughes  
**Executive Producer:** Mark Hamlyn  
**Duration:** 26 minutes  
**Year:** 2001

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