

Friends in deed

50 YEARS OF QUAKER SERVICE AUSTRALIA

by Heather Saville

- SYNOPSIS-

Friends in deed is the inspiring story of Australian Quakers who built a respected international aid organisation from just an idea and passionate commitment. Written by former chair of Quaker Service Australia (QSA), Heather Saville, it is not simply an historical account of one organisation that began as a couple of boxes in the home of a Melbourne Quaker and is now a recognised development agency with projects and partners in many countries. It captures the struggles of real people living their beliefs and the evolution of development thinking over half a century.

Saville recounts the origins and growth of the projects QSA has supported in Vietnam, Cambodia, the Pacific Islands, India, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The unexpected turns some of these projects took – whether because of political circumstances, chance meetings among the people involved or success leading to new opportunities – provide valuable insights into how ‘development’ actually happens on the ground.

Through the experience of one small NGO, the book draws lessons about what works and what doesn’t – and why. Saville suggests that some of the principles which have guided Quakers since their intervention in the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s – an emphasis on food and water security, working closely with local communities, ensuring environmental integrity and knowing when to withdraw – are still relevant today, when looming global food and ecological crises threaten the lives of millions. She casts doubt on some of the tenets of contemporary development goals with their ostensible focus on ‘the poorest of the poor’. For many really poor people development is just a dream.

Using interviews with those who have worked in or with QSA, Saville employs their own words to bring their stories to life. She includes work in Australia with Aboriginal communities from Western Australia through to Queensland over the entire 50 years.

Friends in deed tackles some of the questions which all development workers ponder: are we helping those who need it most? How effective is our work? How could we do it better? What can we learn from our mistakes and our failures? She also offers answers to some of the frequently asked questions: Where does the money come from? Is it going to the poor? Does all this aid do any good?

Told with humour and profound respect for the humanity and courage of QSA’s project partners (not to mention its volunteer workers), this is a story that will inform the general reader about the day-to-day reality of development work. For those working in the sector, whether in government agencies or NGOs, it will add to the debate about the value of their labours. At a time when the role of NGOs in the humanitarian field often influences that of governments, this book is a contribution to one of the great issues of our day. Many people around the world look at the state of the planet and ask, “What can I do?” Some despair. *Friends in deed* may give them reason to hope – and act.