

The Red Page

THE AUSTRALIAN UGLINESS

The Australian Ugliness. By Robin Boyd. Cheshire, 35s.

Robin Boyd's arresting title may lead some people to think that this will be a knocking book. It is not, for it is written by someone thoroughly involved with Australia, with its successes as well as its failures, with its possibilities as well as its awful messes. But Boyd puts the boot in where necessary, with the expert precision of an anatomist who knows exactly where it will hurt most.

The book tackles the whole visual experience of living in Australia in 1960, which leads Boyd into some excellently conducted analyses of the national character and its origins in our peculiar history and geographical situation. Boyd is a distinguished architect and an experienced writer about his subject; his pen-and-ink drawings which illustrate the book are as clear and witty as his prose, a rare combination of abilities which he shares with Osbert Lancaster.

The ugliness he is searching out is not, however, only an architectural one; it involves all that hits the eye from Surfers' Paradise to the model town of Elizabeth in South Australia. Though this book ought to be prescribed reading in all Government departments for 1961, Boyd is too honest to refer all faults to official channels. We get what we deserve, and, above all, the book is a brilliant analysis of average Australian taste, of what we poor mugs think is "good."

It is, after all, our fault that officialdom is so powerful here, that we bronzed independent Aussies are one of the most regimented nations on earth. Boyd does indeed show how the official mind did its best to foul-up two planned towns, Canberra and Elizabeth. He tells the shocking story, which younger readers will probably not know, of the way Griffin's plan for Canberra was shoved out of the way by a departmental board, and how "The Bulletin's" campaign to "Save Canberra" was signed by nearly three-hundred architects in a few days, and how Griffin was eventually allowed back again, only to be hindered as much as possible.

Similarly in South Australia, where the Housing Trust, with its immense powers and resources, had wonderful opportunities for imagination and boldness in laying out the new town of Elizabeth, the architects and planners were restrained and forced to toe the line with average, dreary, Australian taste.

Boyd lays most blame on what he calls "Featurism," a dishonest concentration on the skin of things rather than on the whole or the essence. "It may be found," he says, "in architecture or in the planning of cities or the design of magazines, espresso bars, neon signs, motor-cars, gardens, crockery, kitchenware and everywhere between. It is the evasion of the bold, realistic, self-evident, straightforward, honest answer to all questions of design and appearance in man's artificial environment."

One of Australia's great tragedies, as Boyd points out, is that we started off so well and so honestly; the few colonial cottages and houses and churches and public buildings that have been allowed to survive are evidence of a modesty and a practical attitude that are the last things that are wanted now. Boyd gives brilliant but dismaying descriptions of the frenzy that grips us now. For instance, what he calls "the North Shore Executive Zone" of Sydney:—

Here some of the most dramatically beautiful country available to suburban commuters anywhere in the world seems to draw out a delinquent streak in nearly everyone who builds.... The few thoughtful buildings of the area are all but lost in a wild scramble of outrageous Featurism clearly planned for the express purpose of extracting a gasp of envy from each passing sports-car.

He goes on to tackle "the annihilatory urge" that demolishes old buildings and trees with equal gusto, the "selective blindness" that ignores overhead wires and streets groaning with advertisements, the "philistinian-puritan denial of reality" which makes so many "features" of Australia so damnably genteel. He is also very interesting on the fact that English and European migrants show no desire to do anything but conform as rapidly as possible with average Australian taste, another demonstration of the perils of pressurised assimilation. Then, again, there are the imitators and worshippers of all things American; this aspect of our character Boyd calls Austerica. He gives this smugness and timidity the boot it deserves.

Boyd has done such a good job in this book that it is painful to criticise him, but for the benefit of the ordinary reader he should have distinguished more clearly between the horrors of featurism and the legitimate graces of decoration. For instance, he is a bit

snooty about the pictures on most people's walls, and a bit pompous about the "frightening honesty of the blank wall."

Nevertheless, these are only minor quibbles. This is an important and valuable book which makes an eloquent and witty appeal for the most despised commodity in Australia—ideas. As long as we conform to the average with our present self-satisfaction, any man with ideas will be trampled on as a subversive disrupter of our peace. The beauty of this book is that it shows just how unsatisfactory is accepted good taste in Australia. It also reminds us that in Australia "constructive talent of the kind essential to the initiation of ideas in all fields is given lower rewards, proportionately to the country's richness, than almost anywhere else." Boyd writes with a love of ideas and a love of his country. A rare combination.

Geoffrey Dutton

The New Kingsley Amis

Take a Girl Like You. Kingsley Amis. Gollancz; Moore's Bookshop. 22s. 6d.

The gentleman who, during the "Lady Chatterley's Lover" trial, wrote to a Sydney newspaper to tell its readers that the most sacred act in human experience was described by a four-letter word may very well find Kingsley Amis's novel too profane. There is no sex worship here. And after a century, and a half in which writers were expected at first to abolish sex from their books and were later expected to give it a special, self-conscious and often arbitrarily "liberated" treatment that is indeed something.

The principal subject matter—the determination of a 20-year-old girl to preserve her virginity despite the many claims made on it—is one that has not often been dealt with in the last century and a half (in the English language at any rate) with anything approaching artistry. For a whole part of that period sex did not exist; some puzzling thing went on between men and women that involved a lot of artificial language; it was as if one described a dinner party by recording the talk but did not reveal what the people were actually eating. In the subsequent period of "liberation" it was impossible to talk about virginity without taking sides; the author joined the seducer in attacking virginity, which had become notoriously bad for morals and/or health.

Now here is a largely comic book, in which there are enough ins and outs of bed to satisfy even the most liberated mind (there is even a comic episode about a lesbian, and liberated minds don't try to be funny about that)

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