

# Shades of Swift - and Humphries too

THE GREAT GREAT AUSTRALIAN DREAM by Robin Boyd. Pergamon. \$5.95.

## BERNARD BOLES

JUST as lord Casey stood head and shoulders above our post-war foreign ministers and moved with ease and urbanity among the diplomats of the world, the late Robin Boyd was able uniquely to gain respect and attention from international architects. It was a rare achievement, more so as his path of ascent appeared effortless.

His plea was for good architecture and planning, especially in this country. His passion was to raise the standards of Australian taste. It was his platform here and overseas and if at times in this book he appears to be smacking the dust from his sandals, there is no doubt that he really cared.

In *The Australian ugliness*, the previous book for which he gained renown, Boyd denounced the scrabble that lay before unseeing eyes. Probably he took his cue from the London *Architecture review* which had more reason to expose such deleterious effects; but what Boyd did in his case was to convince the contented denizens of our lovely, lovely suburbs that they were abetting the spread of visual trash, and therefore ugliness which can be a by-product of prosperity, as it is of poverty.

One can only hazard a guess as to why he wrote *The great great Australian dream*. Certainly, not for mere emulation, though there are reasons why he might have desired it to be accepted in a popular sense, for he was an unusual publicist and extended the message of *The Australian ugliness* in media and forum. At that time there was no national committee embracing his profession or the kindred arts that had not invited him to be a trustee or leading member.

Ironically, the more Boyd was inducted into the opaquely smug Australian establishment, the more, against all precedent, did he set out to compile this cruel, funny and horrifying indictment of its gaucheries. Yet, one is loth to call Boyd a social radical, let alone a rebel. He was a leveller who wanted the decks cleared for Australia to partake in current world styles without being ten or fifteen years removed. There is, however, no insistence that Australia should be smarter than this.

Boyd was a reformer from his early years, but unlike most reformers made his way to the top without a hint of conflict. As a young man, in the post-war years, he was able to provide needed assistance as a columnist for small home projects. Instead of beginning his reforming in the rough and tumble world where only the winners make newspaper headlines, he was able to make his start sedately within their walls.

His years as a lecturer to students were equally propitious. Maybe without knowing it, when he formally accepted the chance to decide national issues, he had crossed the Rubicon. The skilful lecturer, who received rapt attention as his due, was now with men who had not the habit of listening unless it suited their immediate ends. If not a party to the dealing,



White Cliffs, New South Wales, sketched by Kenneth Jack in 1970

COLLINS' "Australian Artists" editions (\$2.95 each) continue to be small booklets on established, but minor and very charming, artists. They have followed up last year's irrelevant volume on Reinis Zusters with new ones on Ray Croke and Kenneth Jack.

The color reproduction is as usual good, except that the Croke plates merge into a powdery pale blue. Each volume has a low-key, celebratory and very badly writ-

ten short introduction — Douglas Dundas on Jack, James Gleeson on Croke.

Kenneth Jack prefers to begin from a very conventional black and white pen drawing of an outback scene, then to wash in some colors in his watercolors, or paint in some texture in a diluted Drysdale manner in his oils and acrylics. He prefers sunsets, rain glow, a stilled scene of gradual weather changes. This is as deep as his perception of the world goes, A

competent artist of record, but little more.

Ray Croke is a more ambitious artist, but he too remains a decorator. He is at his best when out on the Pacific islands contrasting a white light with fresh, silver, tropical green vegetation and near-silhouetted native figures. His style is distantly Gauguinesque in that it is essentially an abstract kind of composition. When he uses the same approach for the Australian outback, the paint-

ings become stilted, rather pointless — they need a touch of the exotic to be at all interesting.

If Collins remains satisfied with promoting a few recent paintings by some of our minor artists, well, full marks for humility and irrelevance. Even turning to younger, more adventurous artists would be a waste of time if they persisted with such chocolate-box formats.

TERRY SMITH

Boyd was at hand when torrid differences arose about the sites of parliament house and the national art gallery; the selection of director for this gallery; the affairs of the art advisory board; the Sydney opera house; the Melbourne city square; and Expo 70.

Only with Expo 70, which Boyd was allowed to direct, was the project cleanly fulfilled, and then only because trade design is a specialised field. Without doubt, Boyd had influence, but at a round table, could he wrap up the debate, pressure eyeball to eyeball, or force the decisions he wanted in a smoke-filled room?

Recently, our Fred Williams was invited to be an artists' representative on the art advisory board. In an interview in the Melbourne *Herald*, Williams said that he was told (by Canberra as good advice) to keep his mouth shut and not say anything. Nor are things easier in the boardrooms of big business.

Boyd set out a schedule. At stage four a community reaches full maturity and looks for the best architects from anywhere.

But, continued Boyd, Australia is still at stage two — where sophistication is imported because of lack of patience to promote what could be better.

In this book, Boyd took up the tools of satire to prise apart the cussedness and intransigence of his countrymen and to get things moving from stage two to stage four. So, as one follows *The great great Australian dream*, Swift comes to mind, as does Barry Humphries, and those US type night club monologues, where manic hilarity takes over in Boyd's rendition of fabulous radio 2KO.

Boyd has read his Orwell but never lets his own hopeful philosophy be submerged for long, and it could be that this book will fit on the shelves alongside local classics like Tom Collins' *Such is life*.

It seems that architects all through history, when they reach maturation, desire to tinker with the human condition. Boyd here has set out to change human nature — to transform the great great whacko Australian style.