

OF ARTHUR, DAVID, ROBIN AND OTHERS OF THE FAMILY BOYD

Pol Profile by PAMELA RUSKIN

"There's a superb Boyd mural at Melbourne's Tullamarine Jetport." "How marvellous! I adored his Retrospective Exhibition at the Arts Centre. It was showing at the same time as the Nolan panels." "That was Arthur! The mural is Guy's." "Oh! He's very good. I saw a terrific exhibition of his at Liddums Gallery during the Adelaide Festival last March." "That wasn't his either. That was David." "Was he the one who designed the space tunnel for our pavilion at Expo?" "You have to be joking. That was Robin."

The Boyds are a source of continual confusion to their admirers and sometimes even to themselves. No other Australian family, not even the famous Lindseys, has a record of continuing artistic achievement to match theirs. It is an achievement that goes down through almost every member of the family at each level of each succeeding generation.

Today, not many Boyds are living and working in Australia. They are migratory, working in England, France, Italy, and occasionally Spain and Portugal. All of them have their roots here, and exhibit their work regularly in Australian galleries. It seems that there is always a Boyd in the news, and always an exhibition by one of the Boyds at one of our galleries. This isn't quite true, but there are enough to keep the Boyd name before the public.

Arthur, the most famous, is one of the few Australian artists to achieve international recognition. He came back to

Australia in 1968 because he said, "I'm homesick. I want to get out into the bush and smell its smells, and see the colours and the light that is different from the light anywhere else." He and his wife and youngest daughter drove up the Queensland coast as far as Cooktown, and bought a 40 acre block at the foot of Mt Tamorine. At that time, he talked of coming back to live in two years' time, and thought he would clear his block and build a shack on it.

Once in Australia Arthur found he was a celebrity, and spent most of his time escaping from the press and acquaintances who wanted interviews or his presence here, there and everywhere. Whether this is the reason, for Arthur is a desperately shy man and something of a solitary, or whether it was the pressure of work in England, Arthur is still in London with no plans for an early return.

The Boyd family tree is complex, especially as the Boyds have a great sense of family and the same names keep popping up. Sculptor Guy Boyd announced proudly a few weeks ago that his seventh child and second son would be named Martin, after his uncle now living in Rome.

But when Martin, a novelist, decided to come back to Australia to live in 1949, he became very irritable indeed, when he was introduced to people and they said, "Martin Boyd? I just adore your pottery. I think it's marvellous and so Australian." A blank look often replaced the enthusiastic welcome when he replied he was a





writer, and that the potter was his nephew Guy Martin Boyd who, at that time, ran a very successful commercial pottery. Guy signed each piece "Martin Boyd". Uncle Martin was not amused.

The first migratory Boyd was a certain Captain John Boyd who arrived in Victoria as military secretary to the Governor in 1860. John and his wife Lucy had a son, Arthur. The present Arthur has a sister Lucy. The first Arthur Boyd, now known as A. M. Boyd, was a water colourist and his wife, E. M. Boyd, was a landscape artist. The works of both husband and wife are in many Australian galleries.

This was the start of the bright golden seam of creative talent that runs through the Boyd family. A. M. Boyd had five children. Gilbert was thrown from a horse and killed when he was nine. Merric became the first really Australian potter using Australian motifs in his designs. His brother Penleigh is still recognised as one of our finest landscape artists, and was something of a youthful prodigy, for he had his work hung in London's Royal Academy when he was only 21. He was killed in a motor accident while in his early thirties before his painting could reach its fullest maturity. Even so, he can be found in most Australian and many overseas galleries. The Boyd family seat in Wiltshire was called Penleigh, and the name is carried on today by Penleigh Boyd's grandson.

The fourth of the children was Martin Boyd, whose novels, *Lucinda Brayford* and *The Cardboard Crown* are almost the only Australian fiction to mirror the early social life of the colony of Victoria with its snobbery, its artificiality, the rigid protocol of Government House circles, and the life of the gay young people who lived in Melbourne's big houses. Helen, the youngest of Merric's children, seems to have been one of the few Boyds in whom the artistic streak did not show up strongly.

Martin Boyd has never married. He was a mystic like his brother Merric, and strongly attracted by Roman Catholicism in his youth and even considered becoming a priest. He never converted, but remained a strong Anglo-Catholic. When he returned to Australia in 1949, he set about restoring the old family home, "The Grange" in Berwick, and had his nephew, Arthur, paint a series of murals round the panelled dining room. An expatriate in London, he hoped to recreate the gracious social life of his youth when he went to dances and parties at all the neighbouring properties. But Martin had been away too long — almost 30

years, and a world war had obliterated all traces of the leisured social graces he admired, and no-one gave or wanted to attend the musical evenings, the dances or the tea parties. With them had gone most of the friends he had known. The Australia he had preserved in his imagination had vanished.

Martin packed his trunks and returned to England and writing. The Grange fell into disrepair and was sold. Sadly, Arthur's murals were left to spoil in the damp and neglect, and eventually less than a quarter of them, about six panels, could be restored.

That is not the end of the Martin Boyd story. A rather acid gentleman, he began to take a dim view of the permissive era of pornographic novels, ugly art, bad manners and the violence that seemed to surround him. He wrote in his autobiography, *Day of My Delight*, published in 1965, "... in England, the artistic world is half-rotten with hoax and imbecility — in the literary world especially in fiction, the decadence is even more evident. My agent's request for pornography is almost sufficient proof of this." It is as easy to imagine the fastidious Martin Boyd writing pornography, as it is to visualise Ivor Novello writing the music for *Hair*. So Martin migrated to Rome where, at the age of 75, he took up painting for the first time. Guy visited him there last year, and Arthur the year before that. They both found him in marvellous health. He had held a couple of exhibitions, and both his nephews say his work has great panache. Even more recently he has picked up his pen again, and his new book arrived at Guy's home a few weeks ago. It is called *On Youth Today — Why They Walk Out*. This is a book of only about 150 pages in which Martin shows great understanding and sympathy for the young people of today who drop out of a world they find cruel and ugly and violent. Martin served in World War I and came to loathe the war and those who glorified it. This is why ultra-conservative Martin Boyd is fighting today on the side of the young.

In the third generation the golden lode gleamed more brightly than before. There was a time in the early 1950s when most of Merric's children lived and worked at the rambling old family home at Murrumbena. Merric's wife, Doris, had been a water colour artist. Merric was still doing some pottery, but at this time he was touched with a strong religious fervour and made fiery pronouncements about the Second Coming, and was concerned with the sins of the world. He looked like a prophet too — tall and thin

with craggy features, burning cavernous eyes and a shock of pure white hair. All over the Murrumbena property you could see easels, kilns, clay, pots of paint. Paint-smearing children trailed behind their blonde, beautiful mothers, or watched their fathers at work. In one cottage, David, incredibly tall, dark and handsome, worked furiously on a canvas, while his wife Hermia, clay to the elbows, was shaping pots. Their children Amanda, Cassandra and Lucinda were watching.

Guy, equally handsome, blonde and blue-eyed, was working on designs to be produced at his nearby kiln, though he didn't live at Murrumbena. Dark, intense Arthur was painting his enamel panels and firing others at his kiln while his son Jamie slapped paint on paper with passionate abandon. In another part of the grounds, blue-eyed, blonde sister Mary would be helping her husband and Arthur's friend, John Perceval, mix colours with son Matthew at her heels. Merric's other daughter Lucy was living with her painter-potter husband, Hatton Beck, in Queensland. Penleigh Boyd's son, Robin, was already making a name for himself as one of Melbourne's most interesting architects.

Most of that early promise has been fulfilled. Arthur Boyd, shy and incredibly modest about his achievements, is the most celebrated of them all. Last year he held three exhibitions in London, and this year will hold three more. Almost all his work, the famous *Nebuchadnezzar* series, the *Bride* series, and the serene paintings of his *Wimmera* period, command prices between \$10,000 and \$17,000. He has also painted some tapestry designs and held two exhibitions of these.

David Boyd and his wife Hermia, after spending some time in Sydney last year, are now living with their three daughters in the south of France. David's Adelaide Festival Exhibition was almost a sell-out, and netted him somewhere around \$50,000. His Melbourne exhibition at the South Yarra Gallery some weeks later was not quite as successful, but still did very well. David has gone through many changes of style, and is now maturing as an artist, developing along lines closer to his brother, though his Ben Boyd series is quite different, lacking the turbulence of spirit that marks Arthur and some of his own paintings.

Guy is the only Boyd with a permanent nest in Australia. He has bought an old home in Brighton, Melbourne, and settled there with his wife Phyllis and his seven children. There he has examples of

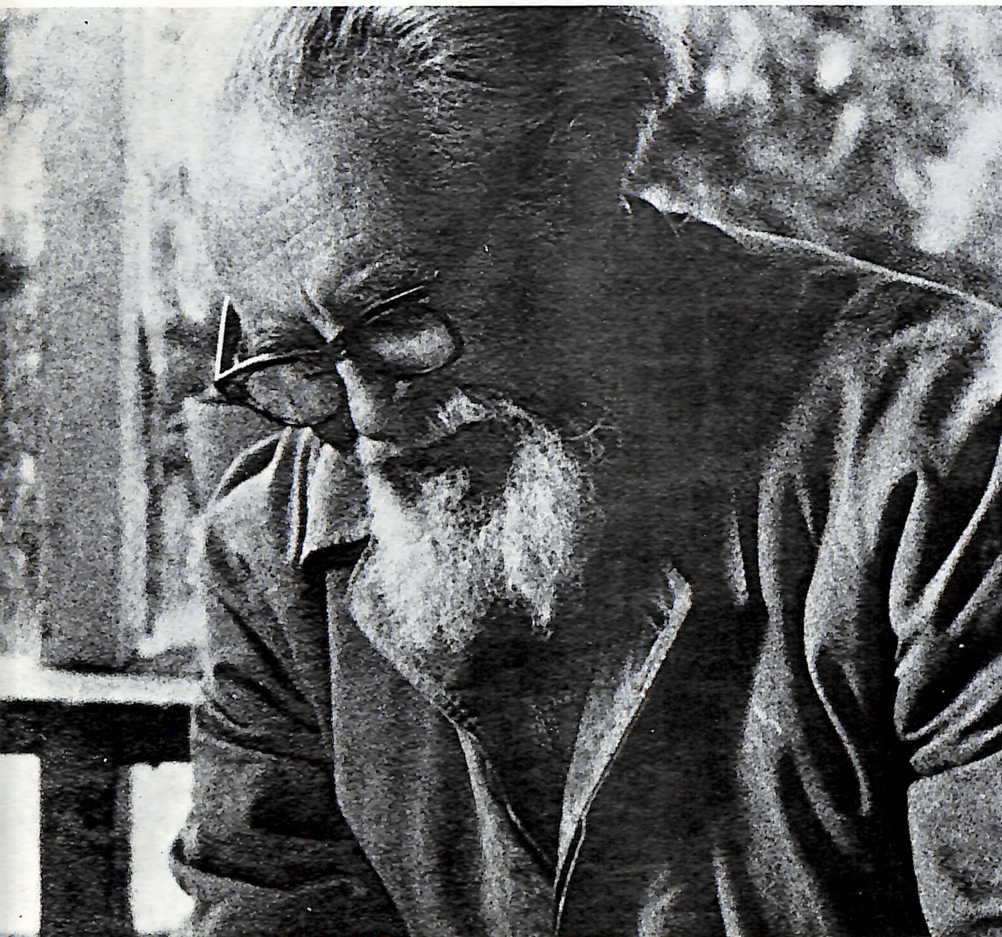
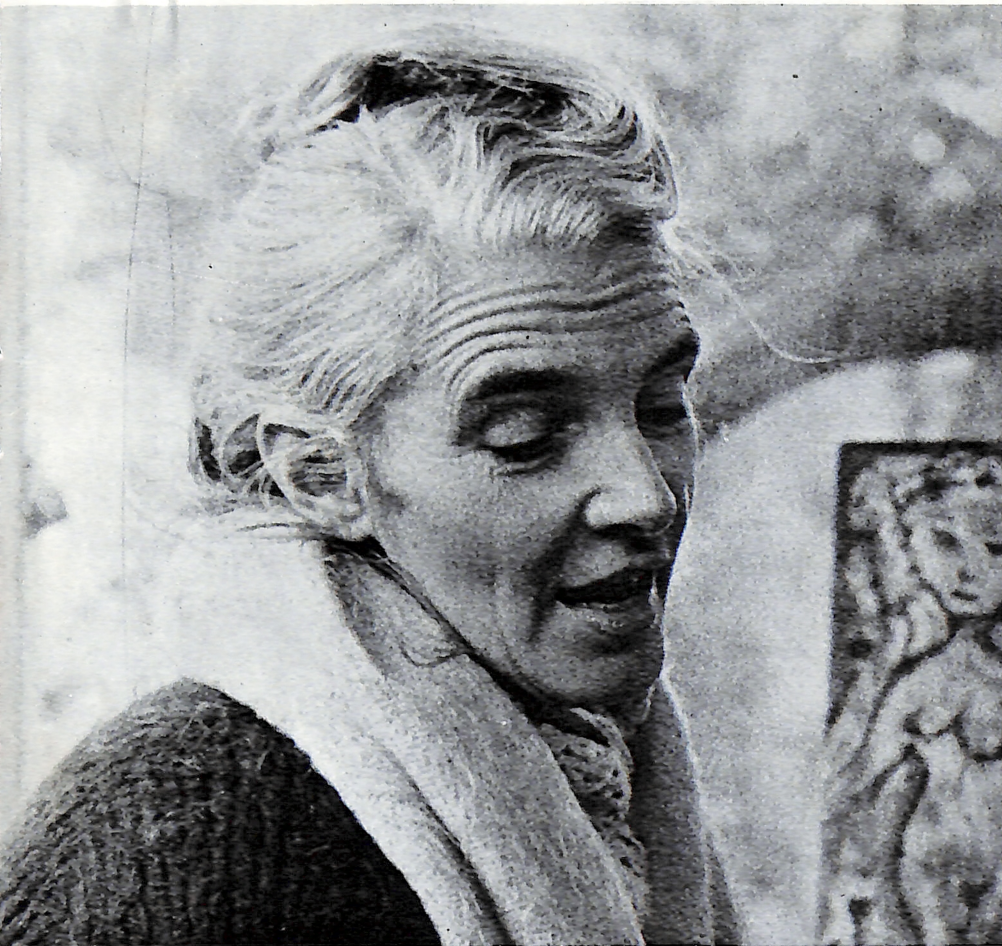
the work of all the early Boyds, of his brothers and of their children too — a sort of lived-in Boyd museum. Some years ago, Guy sold his pottery and turned to sculpture full time. He has a studio behind the house and there he works, mostly casting his sculpture in bronze or oxidised silver. Like his brothers, he is interested in mythological themes. His work is graceful and full of movement. Guy, as a late starter, has had to battle hard for recognition, overshadowed as he has been by his brothers. Last year, however, he won a Churchill scholarship and went round the world, studying the work of the artists and sculptors.

He was in England in July to attend an exhibition of his sculpture at the Leicester Galleries and he has recently held an exhibition in Sydney. Guy's commission for the Tullamarine mural means that another Boyd has a permanent place in the life of Australia. It is a big work, 30 feet by 15 feet wide, sculptured in oxidised silver, so that the raised parts have a silver patina and the recesses are black. The legend the mural portrays is of the two Aboriginal tribesmen who were changed into swans by their witch doctor brother so that they could fly over the camp of another tribe and see what weapons their women were making. The witch doctor found he could not change his brothers back into men again. As they were flying away an eaglehawk attacked them and crows dropped their black feathers on them so that they became black swans.

Of the two sisters, Mary lives in England and has become a photographer. Lucy and her husband, Hatton Beck, are working as ceramic artists in Melbourne, and recently held an exhibition at the Manyung Gallery.

And so to the fourth generation, and still the gold gleams brightly in the artistic Boyd lode. Arthur's son, James, in his early twenties, has just married a Portuguese girl, Maria, and brought her to Australia for his exhibition of his work in July. James Boyd is a painter who has already held successful exhibitions in London. He is considered to have tremendous potential as a painter. Mary and John Perceval's son, Matthew (the Perceval marriage is now broken up), is also a painter of great promise. He is living in the same village in the south of France as his Uncle David and working there. Matthew held a very successful exhibition in London last year, at which Guy bought one of his nephew's paintings. "He is really very talented," says Guy.

Guy's eldest daughter, Lenore, is now 17 and a promising sculptor who has had



buyers for her work since she was 14. Guy says, "She's working at sculpture only half-time this year, and doing a typing and shorthand course as well. Next year she will be working all the time at her sculpture and will hold her first exhibition in Adelaide." Lenore has already sold some of her work to Australian Galleries.

Of Lucy and Hatton Beck's three children, Robert Beck lives in Melbourne and is a potter and painter, Paul Beck is a musician at the Royal Academy in London, and Lawrence Beck is an actor, at present living in Paris. David and Hermitia's three graces are living with their parents in the south of France, and two of them at least have already been most successful as models for the very young fashions.

Robin Boyd, author of such best-selling books on the Australian scene as *The Great Australian Ugliness* is the designer of many notable buildings in Melbourne as well as the interior of our pavilion at the 1967 Expo in Montreal and Space Tube at Expo 70, and he is as famous in his field as any of his cousins. His son, Penleigh, is a fourth year architecture student, and in the course of time it seems likely that another Penleigh Boyd will become known to Australians. Robin's brother, Pat A'Beckett Boyd, was a flying ace in World War II and is now with TAA. He and Arthur used to go on sketching excursions together in their youth, but he never paints now. Of his three children, his son Penrose shows some artistic talent.

The Boyds never quite know where the other Boyds are, but they are all fond of one another in a detached, unpossessive way, and terribly generous in their praise of each other's rather than their own achievements. As a family, they are friendly and rather vague, as people are who are so immersed in their work that nothing outside it seems quite real.

The story has been told before, but it explains the Boyds. An old lady is supposed to have asked Martin Boyd, "How do you find time to design all those wonderful houses, paint all those exciting pictures, do all that amusing pottery and write books too?" It seems the confusion is likely to increase rather than diminish. The fourth generation is swinging into its stride, and a fifth generation is already beyond the blueprint stage and already toddling, no doubt with a paintbrush clutched in its sticky little hands. All those Arthurs, Lucys, Penleighs and Martins. All that paint and clay and canvas and ink and blueprints and slide rules and music. ■