

Boyd's concerto for blowfly

THE GREAT GREAT AUSTRALIAN DREAM, By Robin Boyd (Pergamon; \$5.95).

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LOOKS LIKE this one used to embarrass me. Poking more holes in the atrophied lobes of the Australian soul, the despairing sniff-sniff-sniffing ground for a so-called identity, founding Moonee Ponds in brilliant Mooneepondese, and the greatest cliché of this day and age, which is the beef that we are still fifteen years behind the rest of the world (the provincial's hatred of the provinces): what's the good of it all, I used to say to myself, before I developed the proper antipodean antibodies.

You can't argue with history; it won't argue back. And anyway, national traits may have their reality, but *The National Character* is an abstraction, far too nebulous for creative minds to bother with. But here a certain type never stops grizzling about it. You find him among magazine writers, on campuses and, above all, in advertising agencies, oddly enough. Semi-creative people, wasting their time in bemoaning the murder of creativity in their country.

But Robin Boyd did not belong to the semi-creative — not by any means. He was a Vital Presence, wasn't he? And here is this posthumous little book of his, about the great great dream, which has two letters broken in it on the cover and, inside, a map of the world with Aussieland right in the happy middle.

At first it only irritated me, because it seemed born of irritation, which amounts to nothing. Our style too mish-mashed to be a style? Possibly, but so what: how do you ensure originality? More talented people here, *pro rata*, than in other places, but more nits to discourage and discredit them? Could be — who knows? — but, oh heavens, if one hears it once more . . . Each new liberal impulse reaching us late and enfeebled, but the word "syndrome", almost dead overseas, here still evilly alive — such a dreary catalogue of the dreary.

Is this the authentic Boyd, crying from the ashes? This gloss on a gloss on *The Ugliness*? You wonder, until you come to the stories — real stories — which are sprinkled through the volume. Then you realise that the project,

a work of love and despair, is broken-backed, but useful to us and generous nevertheless.

Forget the parts about beer bellies and bulging shorts, the clever-dull chapter introductions in the manner of unclever and dull travel brochures. Any sophisticated sixth-former could have written them. Skip even the generalisations on architecture and culture because only two things distinguish them from three hundred similar ones, namely Boyd's lovely gift for inventing plausible documentation and his insistence that the natively small is belittled only by trying to ape the big.

But get on to the stories, because they are good. They show that when a deep-feeling man like Robin Boyd gets hold of a commonplace theme (the theme of Australia as a common place) and turns it to art, to the imaginative, he will sometimes turn it to wit and pathos. His stories' bitterness springs from suffering, not from intolerable egotism.

Some are disguised as reportage. Such as, for instance, the one about our way with the blowfly, and the dear blowey's way with us. The lead-up surveys the historical background, which is ampler than one knew, and explains why we can't be bothered to do anything about the pest. Nothing very much in all that. Then fancy takes over, and we arrive at the Baldwin Spencer Society, which loves blowflies and protects them, within (Australian) reason. This actually began before 1973, the year which saw the first performance of Ogden's *Concerto for Blowfly*.

You see how Robin Boyd did it. He took a typical "situation" and, by seemingly unhibited gasconading, expanded its relevance. He did it much better than it is done in the Sunday papers because he allowed himself all the space he needed. His best in this vein is his story about Gordon Hope, the

East Melbourne architect, and Mr. Collings, for whom he built the famous Collings house, the house of Integrity which began with an idea for tight anchorage to a living tree, and ended with a romping room that swayed away into the pool. It is very funny; good flying but more than flying. No Joern Utzon should be without it.

Three or four pieces are sad as well as ruthlessly grim. There is the one about how Mr. Australia was conceived, a shocker a little in Hal Porter's mould. There is the complex and moving tale, on

two time levels, about why Disneyland was not built in the Snowy Mountains after all, and an horrendous *Abgesang* about the Yank who was taken on a hunt north of Capricorn, a hunt which made him not only wake but collapse in fright.

If Boyd were still alive I would beg him to do a story about some 20-odd bombings and burnings, without (as I write) arrests, under the greenwood tree in the non-existing Ustasha jungle within an Australo-Slav community. For, loving his land, he knew where its parasites grow and how they are nourished and cared for.

This was because he could see the present in the past, because he had a lively historical sense. But when he looked at the social present alone he saw only what all can see. Therefore his last book is half grey and half glorious, a curious and touching farewell.