

Historic Homesteads of Australia: Australian Council of National Trusts.
Cassell Australia. \$14.50.

Australia, I hope, will accept this book as it might the discovery of a long forgotten jewel-box that belonged to Great-grandmother. When the lid, or cover, is opened, a cascade of antique gems and ornaments spills out over the coffee table.

Here is a treasury of homesteads of old Australia, big and small, photographically restored to most of their original glory.

And what a glory it was! In its pure form of stone single storey and encompassing veranda it was perhaps the most original creation which this country has ever developed. The aesthetic impulse came, of course, from the old Country. It picked up some hints on climatic control on the way through India. But the Australian stone and timber, her dry heat and wide spaces, gave it a characteristic form that is recognizably Australian in a way which no building of this century ever can be.

Some of the buildings and their photographs in this book are breathtaking in their beauty, the splendid houses still sparkling as if new. Some houses are a little the worse for wear, though perhaps more endearing for that. The later ones were more pretentious in following the fashion of their day, which was some ten years behind the contemporary fashion of England, and so inevitably look old-fashioned now rather than antique. Thus the collection is uneven in quality, but overall it suggests a forgotten and fairly uniform culture. It recalls a heritage which, though fading, is susceptible to revival by such waves of nostalgia as a

book like this can stir up from still chauvanistic depths.

The qualities which make a building look Australian may be isolated easily enough. One is the easy accessibility, French windows opening most rooms to the flagstoned verandas. Another is the sprawl of the outbuildings, which are part of the complex which makes a home a homestead, and often attract the modern photographer as much as the house itself. But the essential element is the veranda, and the subtle details of its form.

If the intentions of this book were strictly architectural, it should have concentrated on the classic form already mentioned. Instead, of nearly fifty examples illustrated only about twenty have the single storey and wide verandah, consistent in style whether made of stone in the south or of timber in Queensland. Another ten are big brothers of that style, taking a form more familiar in England: they have a second storey, eavesless and unshaded, rising free of the veranda into the sunshine. Then there are two or three with second tier veranda to shade the upper floor, which restores the Australian look.

Another ten or so, mostly Tasmanians, have no verandah at all, no more than a sturdy porch over the entrance such as any house might have worn in Europe, though perhaps of charmingly cruder execution. Four or five more are in the full-blown late Victorian manner: arcaded, bejewelled, be-towered, and decorated with magnificent, unerring vulgarity in every touch of the Italian plasterers' trowels.

One example - Clarendon in Tasmania - had when it was young a century ago a two-storey portico with six tall, fat columns. These divorce it from all English or Australian precedent and relate it to Dixie.

So it can be seen that neither architecture nor indigenous materials bind the contents of this book into a whole. Only sentiment can do that. You and I may recognize easily a family resemblance running through the pages, but we would probably find it hard to convince an overseas reader of the strength of its presence. Still, let us not fuss about outsiders' impressions. There is great domestic joy to be had from turning over the pages of this handsome book.

It has been published by Cassells and the National Trusts to celebrate the Cook bicentenary celebrations, and is the first of an intended series. No editor is named, and in the best Australian literary tradition the various historians, architects and laymen who have contributed chapters about respective houses gave their services in an honorary capacity, as the foreword proudly announces. Somehow this is believable. A lot of the text is rather sterile but, as if for balance, we read that one house is "pregnant with Australian history". I throw in that information not to put off anyone from buying this delightful picture book. Very few who do are likely to read the text, anyway. I mention it only in the faint hope that future volumes in the series may more closely match in literary style the sophistication of the architectural style of some of those precocious pioneer builders of the early nineteenth century.