

THE RICH (IN ART) GET RICHER
- and the culturally poor get poorer

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for 'Walkabout'

Our great Australian experiment in egalitarianism is well advanced at the close of the year 1963. Australia now can confidently claim an extraordinarily even distribution of comfort and security, with probably less poverty and proportionately fewer millionaires than anywhere else on this globe, and a relationship between Jack and his Master so equal that it is hard for an outsider to tell who's the boss and who's the servant, who's the salesman and who's the customer.

But this historical experiment is developing a strange contrary side-effect that was never contemplated by the inventors of the Australian Way because they were not by nature inclined to think of such things. Something quite non-egalitarian is happening in the field of the arts - the lively as well as the serious ones. Looking at the state of our island civilization today, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the inexorable tendency is for the culturally rich to be getting richer, while the culturally poor are getting distressingly poorer.

It is generally recognized, for example, that Australian art is flourishing. This means different things to different men. To some the exciting news is that Sidney Nolan and three or four other star Australian names are quite frequently heard in the cocktail chatter of London and New York. To others the important thing is that more of our artists than ever before are making keen and original statements in plastic paint on hardboard and are shaping the vague outline of an Australian school of painting. Whichever way you look at it, Australian painters have never before been so respected and so well reimbursed for their pains, and as a direct result they have never before painted so confidently, experimentally, cheerfully and well. The first worldly successes in

London of the Australian art contingent about six years ago had an electrifying effect on the morale of their colleagues who stayed at home. Suddenly a load of inhibiting doubt which had built up in our isolation was lifted. Any painter could begin to believe that he too could win London's heart. Any of them can now believe that they are painting for the world. A new spirit and strength thus flows through the veins of Australian art, or so we like to believe.

But by art in this context we mean the paint on the six-by-four-foot sheets of masonite in the galleries. Concurrently with the triumphs of the gallery painters, is it possible to detect any changes, any sympathetic revision of values, in the kind of art that is rather more familiar to the Australian public? Are the pictures above the mantle-pieces in the average Australian brickveneer any less lurid than before? Is popular illustrating improving? On the contrary. A gilt-framed 'photo' of a colour-drenched Swiss lake seen through a rose-covered pergola is still the favorite picture of the nation. Even that more sophisticated version of the same sort of visual soft drink - the 'Pop Art' of America - has not arrived here yet. As for the field of illustration, the situation is positively in decline, for the language of black and white illustration used to be one of Australia's sharpest means of communication. Half a century ago the Australian school of black and white was known internationally and the great names of Phil May, Dyson and Low stood for a tradition of brilliant draftsmanship, acid political comment and good humour, all rolled into a few apt brush strokes in the columns of the Bulletin or Smith's. But today the Bulletin does not appear to be able to find artists to suit its new style, while Smith's Weekly is dead and forgotten, and Australian black and white is reduced to one token, painfully outback comic strip in a daily newspaper page full of syndicated strips from the U. S. A.

To be fair to the New Look Bulletin, it may be used as an example on the other side of the scales in another field in which our cultural schism is startlingly obvious : the field of the magazine stall. The shelf devoted to presentable Australian magazines may still be short enough, but it is longer than ever before. Bulletin and Nation make two regular papers of current comment which are done with some elan and professional skill. Meanjin is no longer a lonely literary journal; this field is almost overcrowded now with half-a-dozen little magazines appearing with reasonable regularity. Art and Australia is an attempt at an art journal of full international status. And, if I may say so, Walkabout is obviously better than ever. But between any of these journals and the mass-circulation Australian magazines is an unbridgable gulf. Somehow the making of coloured magazines is not a craft which comes naturally like tennis or swimming to Australians. The most widely circulated are weekly women's newspapers rather than magazines, with coloured inserts of material taken direct from American women's magazines. The depressing thing about these, as about their sisters, the home monthlies, is the dowdiness of them. They manage to make slavish imitations of their American models while sapping all the style, spirit and glamour out of them. When they mock up a table setting of rich dinner fare they seem never to be able to get the colours right; they pick a floral tablecloth or a wrong centrepiece. When they attempt a smartly decorated livingroom they have an uncanny knack of gathering conflicting patterns together. Despite all the study they must have put into the American papers, it seems almost as if they cannot yet understand the American lesson. However, this cannot be so; what they do must be deliberate. It seems that their aim is to popularize for Australian suburban tastes the over-glamorous material in the parcels of syndicated cuttings they buy from America. It might not be fair to

say that the Australasian Post is typical, but it is at least representative of the approach of Australian popular magazines in the photographs it likes to feature of bathing beauties in back yards, posed against woodsheds.

As the success of the little literary magazines indicates, serious writing on the whole is sharing the better climate enjoyed by painting, and Australian authors like Patrick White, Alan Moorhead and Morris West are known internationally to be among the leaders in their own chosen genres of writing. Yet when Patrick White was asked by an American sporting magazine for a comment 'by Australia's most popular author' he felt obliged to decline and to suggest that they get in touch with the author of the soap opera Blue Hills. The average Australian sportsman of course has never heard of Patrick White. The papers which the sportsman reads and the television and radio stations he chooses to tune into would not consider White a celebrity even in the context in which they are prone to use a celebrity : as a contributor to a collection of unpaid opinions on the merits of stiletto heels or drinks for teenagers.

In a similar way the theatre is enjoying a modest revival. After the Seventeenth Doll came a new flow of Australian plays from a new younger generation of writers who may be dreaming of scripting the first Australian film for a decade but who settle for a three-act play for a little theatre group. During a run lasting a month or so these plays are well attended, and are well discussed subsequently by critics in the little magazines and the better newspapers. But the names of the authors and the actors and the producers of such plays are not known in the popular commercial theatre. There, where the machine churns out four-year-old musicals from Broadway, the very suggestion of an Australian play is bolshevik talk. The names of experimental and creative workers in drama also are not known in the popular

commercial television stations, where executives officially bewail the shortage of native Australian talent while the telecine rolls out endless films from Hollywood. Again, the names are unknown in Australian film-making circles, for the good reason that these circles have shrunk to a little ring grinding out one-minute commercials for television.

The art of architecture is prospering here today as never before. This is the almost unavoidable result of a prosperous economy, bringing more demand for buildings and more opportunity for architects. Still, there have been building booms in the past which were no great shakes architecturally, like the one of the eighteen-eighties. The good things in architecture now are the anthesis of boom time ostentation. The serious architects of Australia are avoiding the temptations of the seductive new materials with their over-abundance of curves, colour, grilles and gilt. The mood of the more advanced architecture of today is quiet and confident. Working in comparative isolation from the smarter centres of architectural fashion, younger Australian designers are beginning to produce what may be taken for the first creditable Australian style since the droopy country homestead. It is an unaffected manner of building, using traditional materials, when called for, but in a rather free way, and using the new materials in a considered rather than a compulsive way. The result is an almost naive simplicity; not merely a shallow, negative effect of plainness as in the old white butter-box style of pioneer modern architecture in the 'thirties. The simplicity is now internal as well as external and results from a desire to create good building, imaginatively, from the ground up. A sophisticated and lightly critical international observer, the English Architectural Review, has described the resulting style or Australian school of building as the most hopeful and exciting architecture in the Commonwealth at this time. It can be

found in several industrial buildings, in a few small public buildings like schools and libraries, in some of our more modest commercial enterprises like a rare motel or small office block, and in numerous houses.

Yet a stranger visiting this country might spend a month or more moving round cities, suburbs and country, taking in what he imagines to be a complete picture of modern Australian society, and never do more than glimpse an example of this architecture up a side street. For the kind of advanced, serious architecture that I have described still represents only about ten per cent of the buildings done by architects, and the buildings done by architects represent only about ten per cent of the total man-made environment of modern Australia.

The remainder is the familiar background of plain old common ugliness. Not just the slums, the rust and the dust of run-down areas that were not very beautiful in the first place; Australia has no monopoly of this sort of ugliness. Not just the ugliness of expediency, which is characteristic of any youngish country - the ill-considered, uncoordinated posts, hydrants, bins, transformers, traffic-signs, tram standards, and the neons, placades, stickers, posters, slogans and cut-out bottles all flecked with shadow-lines from the overhead wires. All that is untidiness rather than ugliness. The real and persistent ugliness of Australia is her popular beautification, her half-hearted and superficial attempts to improve appearances - the vivid, saturated colours, the sheared shrubs and the pollarded trees, cropped into neat dish-mop shapes like trees in toyland, and the shallow outdated smartness of the household appliances decked in horizontal stripes and trade names - all the petty, pretty ornaments of the sales departments, done without style, without conviction, without heart, without ideas, and

swallowed uncomplainingly and unquestioned by nearly eleven million customers.

But the most convenient of all places to go to examine Australia's cultural class distinction is perhaps the compact field of the radio dial. Here the haves and the have-nots are sharply defined in extremities of contrast, yet are separated physically by only the smallest twist of a knob. The Australian Broadcasting Commission's second programme has been for long the butt of popular jokes for being beyond comprehension in its dullness of classical music and deadly talks. The ABC's reorganisation of programmes, known as Newrad, in August this year, was apparently designed to bring an even more pointed redistribution of features, accentuating the squareness of the second programme. This became frankly an entertainment for the culturally conservative minority, its last refuge on the air. The size of the minority can be measured approximately in this case, thanks to radio ratings, or popularity surveys. It varies between capital cities from about three per cent in Melbourne and Brisbane to about five per cent in Sydney, Adelaide and Perth. It drops below three in the country. On this evidence, the cultured, thoughtful or square audience for radio is drawn from about three per cent of the population. There would be nothing remarkable about this low figure if the radio dial offered a gradual transition from such serious listening through various degrees of specialised entertainment to the broadest and lightest. There is admittedly a sort of buffer in the form of the ABC's alternative more popular, programme in each State, but after that the remainder of the crowded dial offers a consistent form of entertainment which is so different from the conservative station's form that one can hardly credit that the listeners to each belong to the same category of the animal kingdom.

The numerous commercial stations, especially the really popular ones which command 25 to 30 per cent ratings, offer with only the rarest

exceptions a continuous parade of records called the Top Fifty. These are fifty slightly different versions of a song about Saturday love sung by a boy of fifteen whose vocal delivery makes Elvis Presley sound like an operatic baritone. His endless lament is interrupted at frequent intervals by advertisements and information on the time and weather delivered with great force and enthusiasm by a young Australian who seems to have picked up almost against his will certain Americanisms of accent and pronunciation. His manner of speech is not to be confused with that of the Australian actor who advertises mentholated American cigarettes in a deliberate American accent thick with manly catarrh. The Australian disk jockeys (sic) speak almost as if they were Americans trying to imitate Australians. For instance they usually eschew the obvious short A, but relish the more difficult, rounded O and R. They do not often go so far as to say 'from A to Zee,' but they will say 'from Ai through Zed.'

Contemplating such anomalies of the Australian scene, some people with the well-being of the nation at heart are not depressed but feel in the face of such debased tastes a certain optimistic elation, on the grounds that the deterioration of the media of popular cultural expression has gone so far that a major reaction must be due any minute.

Others will of course deny the whole thesis that there is anything especially Australian about this cultural split, claiming that a gulf equally wide inevitably divides the artistically rich and poor anywhere. But this is sentimental ostrichism. The split is unquestionably wider and more consistent here. For instance, the public taste in paintings may be equally undeveloped in, say, South Africa and in many other countries, but the leading painters of those countries are not accepted as being in the small company of foremost creative world painters.

Conversely, most other countries have presentable literary magazines and an occasional art journal about the standard of Australia's, but not many countries could claim nothing superior in the popular field to our offset parades of back-yard beauties.

Again, our best architecture may not set the world on fire, but it can be taken seriously by international critics. And among the countries which produce any architecture that can be taken seriously at the highest level there is none with so much bad, over-decorated, uneducated design on the popular level, together with such an unholy tangle of posts, wires, advertisements, and chopped trees as an accepted background. There is none with so many unrepentant exploiters of natural beauty and so few authorities prepared to question the inalienable right of any citizen to make a hideous mess in the public street for commercial purposes. Although Australia may appear no more of an artificial tangle than, for instance, California, it has nothing like California's newly established Cultural Heritage Board, which is empowered to designate not only old buildings, but significant trees also, as historic monuments for preservation.

There is no other country which has on the one hand such proud patriotism and independent spirit and on the other such a lack of self-respect as to be content with popular entertainment consisting almost entirely of American cast-offs, introduced by Australians who try to disguise that they were born on the poor man's side of the Pacific.

And yet there are some small signs that the optimists who anticipate a reaction may be right. Perhaps 1963 may even come to be the year marked down by future social historians as the year the tide began to change. The appointment of a Senate Select Committee to enquire into ways of encouraging Australian production in television was one sign of

the change in 1963. Another, that went almost unnoticed outside the rich suburban area of Kuring-gai in Sydney, was small but very significant. The Council of that area introduced a code of outdoor advertising which is the first step in this country this century to control the jungle of suburban shopping streets. The code provides that no shop shall display more than the name of the proprietor, the general nature of the business and the address and phone number. All other signs, such as advertisements and cut-outs for soft-drinks, sweets, cigarettes and newspapers, are banned.

These are but small signs. The tide will not really change until we grow a little wiser and our leaders grow a little more pride. Australia's difficulty today is that, while freely stealing the phrase "an affluent society" from America, we are not in fact yet affluent enough to permit our leaders of commerce and industry moments to relax and look about them and feel a pride in their community larger than the pride in their own facades. The standard of artistic education back in the 'twenties, when our leaders were at school was quite woeful, and incentives to self-improvement have not yet developed to influence our artistically self-uneducated bosses as they go about their business of shaping our goods and our street-scenes, and choosing our radio and television programmes. They are still not making enough money to allow themselves to indulge in community pride. In this way they are so different from the American leaders whom they so admire. The mood of this country still permits the directors of our television stations to excuse on grounds of hardship, their failure to present any Australian drama: they explain that their profits might drop if they did.

Thus it was not expected when the Chamber of Manufacturers in Sydney was thrown into something of a flap by the Kuring-gai ban on shop veranda

advertising. The ban would have a bad effect on the sale and distribution of goods, said the Chamber, and it called a protest meeting and gave warning of opposition to any other Councils with the temerity to consider similar bans. Australia is still safe for the coca-colas sign and the giant plastic icecream cone.
