

The Australians: book review for the A. B. C. September, 1966.

It is unlikely that I will have any listener who is not by now aware of the book called 'The Australians'. It was released with great fanfare, attended by much publicity, and described as no less than Australia's greatest single volume publishing achievement ever. It has stood at the front of almost every bookseller's show-window in the country. The lifesize face that stares out from its 11-inches square dust jacket - a tanned, tough, classically Australian face under the sweat-stained band of a wide brimmed hat - must be familiar to you by now. It is a face to stare back at, and to wonder about for it is uncomfortably perfect as the typification of Australians. What you like to read in those slightly narrowed blue eyes and in that slight curl of the loosely-closed mouth is what you feel about this country.

Surely everyone by now knows the story behind the book: how Robert Goodman, an ace American photographer came here briefly for the National Geographic magazine, but returned later with plans to do a major book that would sell Australia to itself and the world. He coaxed a dozen big companies to finance it and he got George Johnston to write the text. These two, photographer and writer, two very different characters, went together far and wide across Australia, like goldminers searching and sifting out the colour, the new gold, that most valuable commodity which we still possess in a jaded old world: novelty, uniqueness.

So the book began as two things, and yet - and this is the first thing to be praised - it comes out as one. Photographs and text are nicely balanced and interlaced and their marriage is an unexpected success. In fact, anyone who might be led to think from the story of its conception that this is not a serious book is likely to be surprised in several ways.

It is easy to understand the attraction of Australia to Robert Goodman. After travelling the world for the Geographic and other American glossies, scouring the well-travelled tourist routes and well-visited novelty spots for new angles, suddenly he found a continent full of new angles - virtually virgin territory, most of it never before trodden by a modern reporter-photographer.

By saying this I probably sound unkind to many worthy people who have produced, Christmas after Christmas big books of photographs of rivers reflecting sulphur wattle and amber-leafed poplars under bluebag skies, with gumtrees looking on as green as lettuce, and koalas, and Collins Street - top end - in spring. Those books were frankly pretty picture books, and any resemblance to the reality of Australian life was accidental and unintentional.

Now, how about this new view through Goodman's lens, which is so vastly different: is it the opposite, the naked truth about Australia?

Well, yes and no. It is vastly different from the old pictorials because Bob Goodman is an artist as well as a pictorial journalist who exploits his modern camera technique to catch the essence of every subject. He sometimes shoots off reels of 35 mm. to get one frame in which the sun, clouds, animals and humans all behave properly, simultaneously. He gets in close to catch the Greek immigrant boy's face apprehensively sizing up his new land. He gets far away up in a plane to put Angas Downs into its right perspective in the endless outback. He straps a radio-controlled camera to the front of a surfboard and from the beach presses the button to photograph the surfer close-up at the critical moment. He anticipates the dramatic second so that he is there with everything composed as Leonardo would have liked it when Ron Barassi and his victorious teammates hold the silver cup aloft as the golden afternoon sun bursts through the glass back of a Melbourne Cricket Ground stand.

But is the result the truth? To a point it is; a search for the visual truth lies behind each picture: the lens explores to the very nub of each situation.

But the whole truth and nothing but? Of course not. Goodman is naturally attracted to visual tension, to pictorial drama. Equally naturally he ignores the commonplace that is so much of man-made Australia. He couldn't care less about suburbia. So 80% of Australians live there? One aerial shot of some red roofs gets that dreary subject out of the way. Bob Goodman goes back

as quickly as he can to the lonely man on a pub verandah at sunset, or the outback race meeting, or the scientist at Lucas Heights. And good luck to him! I much prefer that he does. I merely remark that his report is not much more ultimately truthful about us than those of the greybeards who focussed the golden poplars on their ground-glass screens. Like them he has a slanted view; the whole purpose of the book was to glamorise Australia, to sell it - but to sell it to much more sophisticated people than those to whom the pictorial annuals are apparently directed. Robert Goodman is a stylist who looks always around the corner for the memorable and characterful image. This work qualifies him to be an honorary Australian of about the fifth generation. Let's hope he stays around awhile.

I've explained that the photographs are only half this book, and now I have no time left to discuss George Johnson's part of it. I can only say that I solemnly believe that no writer in Australia, which means in this context the world, could have done it better. He goes over old ground with new excitement. He treats the land, the people, the cities, the economy, sciences, arts, sport, Anzac, all with equal enthusiasm, writing as a man with myths in his eyes, who knew it all from birth and yet discovered it afresh for himself in 1964.