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Self-scrutiny Down Under

by Geoffrey Moorhouse

AUSTRALIAN CIVILISATION, edited by Peter Coleman (Angus and Robertson, 30s).

There'll be some sore hearts in Sydney when this one reaches the bookstalls. For here we have 15 Australians taking a long introspective look at their society; trying to decide not so much what makes it tick as whether, indeed, it does have a peculiar sound of its own. Terribly critical in the process they are, too, not even the audacious Mr Morris would have dared to utter half the treasons to be found in this symposium.

Is there, the contributors were asked, such a thing as a distinctive Australian civilisation? Has Australia come of age? These sound like O level questions and by my marking those who have addressed themselves rigidly to them only get beta minus for their pains. The most stimulating essays are by those who have sharply analysed without driving themselves too hard towards either of these conclusions. Max Harris defaces the old Colonial image and sketches in its place a nation of conformist city dwellers. These have created, according to Robin Boyd, an environment which looks as if it is "not altogether loved but liked quite a bit in a hearty, inexperienced sort of way." They are the victims, A. A. Phillips suggests, of an educational system which has not yet adapted itself to the local ethos: there is a conflict between the Australian assumption of happiness and the European technique evolved from a sense of dissatisfaction. If this seems to postulate a people of limited vision James McAuley, at any rate, sees hope in the development of Australian literature.

All of these write with a great deal of penetration. But they are describing, it seems to me, not a distinctive civilisation so much as a highly individual nation. Nor is it yet time for them to hold that birthday party. Not when Douglas McCallum can start a chilling essay thus—"Most Australians could not care less about the liberties of others, at home or abroad. They react only when their own specific interests are engaged"—and argue his case convincingly. The unorthodox is publicly ridiculed, there is coercion by the police and by that OK only the Returned Servicemen's League, even academic freedom is severely restricted, and "individuals have turned out to be relatively powerless in fighting for their rights against entrenched power, conformity and complacency."

It has usually been left to visiting fire-brokers to stick their necks out as far as this, and much ill-will their candour has won them. When a group of Australians decide to take the Commonwealth apart with the connivance of Australia's major publisher, an important turning point has been reached. This is an uneven book with some curious lapses; the position of the aborigines is ignored, and the Roman Catholic-Protestant tensions are but thinly treated. But for what it achieves, as a manifestation of new radicalism *Down Under* it deserves to be widely considered.