

'You should write a book.'

'You should write a book.'" It was early 1969 in John Playford's office at the Politics Department at Monash University.

Arena had published two articles of mine, 'Labor versus the Unions' and 'A Race Apart?', while *Labour History* carried one on 'Convicts and Rebels'.

'I couldn't write a book. I had trouble enough with a 9,000-word article.'

'Books,' said John, 'are ten or twelve articles brought together.' Even then, I felt there would be more to it.

'I've a publisher friend. I'll arrange for you to see him.'

A few afternoons later, I was on the train from Glen Waverly, where I taught year-12 Australian History, to Little Collins street to meet the commissioning editor with F.W. Cheshire, John Hooker.

What did I tell him? Whatever I said, it would have been a long way from what appeared in print eighteen months later, fifty years ago this October. Though I had chanced upon the title, *A New Britannia*.

'When you've got a complete manuscript,' Hooker ended our encounter, 'get in touch.'

Innocence and ambition merged. I supposed that I had a contract. Without that delusion, Milton's 'Fame is the spur' would not have made me 'scorn delights and live laborious days.'

What the head brother had identified as my 'scatterbrain' would have gone on producing articles, but not set me on the path to become a dilettante with a score of titles in the next forty years.

My then wife, Judy, had matriculated from a dairy farm at Bundalaguah; her work ethic proved contagious and incurable, but one of her continuing gifts.

Early in December 1969, the door-bell rang on our South Yarra flat. There was Hooker. Before I have the wit to invite him in, he says: 'I'm not sure whether you remember me?'

'Oh yes, indeed ...'

'I've left Cheshire,' ... my heart drops ... 'to take a job with Penguin. Here's my card. If you're interested, get in touch.' With that, he was down the steps.

Penguin. Penguin Books. A Penguin author.

Even today, that prospect can thrill. Back then, each month Penguin's publicity screeds set the agenda for readers. We would work through them,

tick off possibilities, wait till the first Wednesday of the month to buy - though not always manage to read all of our purchases before we selected the next enticements.

John was a chancer, a double-dyed anarchist in personality and politics. He was breaking the law by publishing *Portnoy*. He told me later that he had assured the Penguin selectors that he had a swag of books to set the country on its ear. Mine was one. John was hit with MS but never lost his toughness, his humour and his warmth.

The professor of Government at the University of Sydney, Henry Mayer, contributed a fortnightly column for the *Australian*, which drew attention to journal articles, including my three. Henry described himself as a 'pluralist,' which he was, though not being bored was his working principle. He was advising Penguin, leading to Anne Summers's *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1975) and Kevin Gilbert's *Living Black* (1977).

After Henry read my manuscript, he told Hooker that it was more thrilling than the Cook Bi-Centenary fireworks and that Penguin should put a battery inside the back cover to prepare readers for shock. The founding editor of *Nation* since 1958 and critic of White Australia, Tom Fitzgerald, told me that he had never before conceptualised racism here.

In keeping with Mayer's advice, reprints carried back cover endorsements: 'this is a very bad book' (Russel Ward); 'cock-eyed and parochial' (Donald Horne); and 'disastrous ... slipshod and superficial' (Alastair Davidson).

My 'Introduction' listed 'five major weaknesses' the absence of culture, women and Aborigines, flawed social theory and method. I already knew too much to write it yet still far from enough to rewrite. However, I was able to recast its argument about racism, nationalism and the Labor Party in a forty-page Appendix to the 2004 edition. The person with whom I argue most continues to be myself.

Put oneself to the state of Australian intellectual and cultural production around 1970. The memorable feature films had foreign directors; a start on theatre with Romeril and Hewitt.

Still possible to fit all the non-fiction works about Australia worth reading into a pair of floor-to-ceiling bookcases. Those on race relations would not have filled a shelf. There was one on women and few enough by them. And scarcely more on environmental concerns despite the ten-volume *Grollier Australian Encyclopedia* (1960), edited by the naturalist Alec Chisholm.

The Sixties had given us scholarly benchmarks from Bernard Smith on the visual arts, John Mulvaney on Pre-History, Geoffrey Blainey on mining, Roger Covell on music and H.M. Green on all forms of writing. In no sense was Australia a desert in 1970 but equally non-fiction titles were not keeping pace with the numbers of university students and graduates.

Penguin's distribution system and price \$1.50 gave *ANB* a head start with four reprints by 1980, and a new edition, with illustrations by Keith Looby in 1984.

Released in the same week as the second Vietnam Moratorium *A New Britannia* appealed to the New Left even though much of my approach overlapped with its targets in the Old Left.

A review from Kelvin Rowley pointed out that the Labor Party dissected in *ANB* had been overtaken by the Technocratic Laborism of Dunstan, Hawke and Whitlam.

Hooker commissioned two more books. Hooker's marching orders were for 'a history for fourth-form boys who hate history.' A teacher recounted one exchange: 'Please, sir, is this a history book?' 'Yes, why do you ask?' 'Coz it's got stuff about cars in it.'

Their success owed much to George Dale as designer. Those were the days before permissions and fees. Impossible to include hundreds of images by the time a third edition brought *Social Sketches* (1978) up to 2001 for Craig Munro at UQP.

When I flew to Brisbane late in 1997 after my mother died, the nurse who showed me her body stopped me as I was leaving: 'I hope you won't mind if I tell you something.' He had grown up in Cunnamulla, with racism the order of the day. Reading the school library's copy of *Aborigines, Race and Racism* (1974) he found that he was not the only person who did not share that prejudice.

Hooker agreed that these were the best reviews an author could have.