THE CARTOONIST as we know him is a modern phenomenon. He has his ancestors in lampoons and broadsides dating back to the Reformation and beyond, but maturity is reached only with the age of mass media. The cartoon then escapes from the role of illustration to a wordy text and begins to express itself directly in visual imagery. Gradually the text becomes more and more subsidiary, often being no more than the “punch line”, though rarely dispensed with altogether.

Even with this new pithiness the art of cartooning has reached its height only when a major talent has been able to flourish without restriction. This has happened when the cartoonist’s views have coincided with those of his employer, especially in crisis conditions, or when an enlightened employer has allowed him freedom from editorial control. From such situations have emerged, among others, a Daumier, a Vicki, a David Low and a Bruce Petty. It is almost axiomatic that a tame cartoonist, or a cartoonist without a viewpoint, can not be a good cartoonist.

Because of the topicality of newspaper cartoons, to be successful they need direct and trenchant political or social content. This means that the cartoonist’s attitudes to a wide range of experience are laid open to public view. Not only his draughtsmanship and inventive talent, but his personal character is under constant stress and scrutiny.

Australia has an honourable history of cartooning. Our best cartoonists stand up well under even the severest scrutiny. Beginning in the 1850’s, the first major contributions were made in Melbourne Punch by Nicholas Chevalier, followed by Montague Scott, then T. Carrington. Montague Scott then worked for Sydney Punch from shortly after its foundation in 1864. Chevalier, though competent as a cartoonist, was primarily a painter, and in any case did not stay long in Australia. Carrington was fundamentally an
illustrator with little capacity for satire. His rather quaint cartoons often creak at the joints as they laboriously act out the points of an accompanying legend. Scott, a much better draughtsman, was able to create convincing visual metaphors to carry his message. This work continued to appear in various publications until around the turn of the century.

Cartooning comes of age, however, with the advent of The Bulletin in 1880. The first staff artist was William McLeod, who had been a cartoonist in Brisbane. In 1884 he was joined by an American, Livingstone Hopkins, better known as “Hop”, and a few years later by Phil May. The incisiveness and linear verve of Phil May established a model of style for many later cartoonists, but he only stayed a few years. Though The Bulletin sustained many other artists its satirical mainstay in this period of its greatness was “Hop”. Remarkably inventive, with a flair for fantasy, he was wide in his interests and quick in his indignation, but always genial and humane. He and his fellow artists contributed to the contemporary current of nationalism and republicanism; egalitarianism mixed with chauvinism; democratic sentiment; and opposition to exploitation. The ferment of these ideas in and

“Big John” Forrest of W.A.
Will Dyson’s 1904 caricature of a dominating colonial politician whose stature was considerably diminished when he moved into the Federal sphere.
around *The Bulletin* was undoubtedly a catalyst, helping writers and artists to develop to the full.

The Bulletin remained a haven for some of Australia’s leading cartoonists even after its greatness had faded. From 1901 Norman Lindsay was for more than half a century one of its principal artists. David Low in World War One, and Percy Leason during the ’twenties and ’thirties carried on and enriched the tradition. These were at the head of an Australian school of cartoonists, nurtured by *The Bulletin*, by Smith’s Weekly, and by various labor and radical publications. The tradition retained its vigour through changing historical circumstances. Hal Gye, Will Dyson, Bancks, Gurney and Finey—these are just some of the well-remembered names from the past. The traditional forms have largely been replaced in the past decade or so, but these artists have their counterparts today in cartoonists such as Rigby, Molnar, Tanner and Petty.

These artists are a very varied group. Molnar makes sophisticated and graphic use of line and mass; a contemporary brashness marks the topical grotesqueries of Paul Rigby; Tanner leans most heavily on traditional caricature and the plausibly incongruous situation. The most original and convincing, however, is Bruce Petty. Though clear enough from his daily cartoons in *The Australian*, this is abundantly demonstrated by his excellent new book.*

*Petty’s Australia Fair* is a cartoonist’s eye view of Australia today. There is plenty of whimsy and humor, but it is no prettified view. Our civilised apathy, cynicism, opportunism, self-delusion and outright affluent greed are stripped bare by every means at his disposal. And these are considerable. Irony, satire, telling juxtapositions, straight reportage, iconoclasm and caricature are informed by acute observation and wide-ranging knowledge. Technically Petty is just as varied. His apparently artless but penetrating draughtsmanship is reinforced with ad-mass symbolism, collage, apt quotation, and flexibility of style. These are all part of Petty’s individuality, which is inseparable from his humanity. In this respect Bruce Petty is a true heir to “Hop”, Phil May, Scott, Finey and Leason. His treatment of mankind is fundamentally sympathetic. He always favors the underdog—and more often than not the underdog turns out to be a starving Asian, one of our serenely ignored Aborigines, or a Vietnamese victim of our “all the way” war.

In his daily cartooning Petty captures a world of meaning in the visual image. This book enhances the image with dialogue and running commentary which must establish him as our most literate cartoonist. An Aboriginal says from the shelter of a bag humpy, “If my father gets a job we’re going to move up into the

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* Bruce Petty, *Petty’s Australia Fair*. Cheshire, $4.25
16% poverty is high, but when you think of India's 82% you don't feel so bad.
slums.” The press blazons its motto: “Fearless and Harmless”. Television makes its debut: “To ensure a high quality and an imaginatively Australian Television service, transmission licences were carefully allocated to whoever had the ready cash.” And Australia proudly boasts its national sport: “Winning.”

Here is an artist akin to Thurber, Searle, Heath Robinson and others of like calibre. Petty is able to maintain a personal vision and has the means to incise it into the public consciousness. The involutions and complexities occasionally complained of in his Saturday morning forays are a distinct virtue in the book format, where browsing brings unexpected rewards. These are made more pleasurable by the book’s superb design and reproduction.

In marked contrast the book Cartoons of Australian History,* collected and edited by Peter Coleman and Les Tanner, is disappointingly in almost every respect. The compilers have tried to produce “a cartoonists’ history of Australia” and feel compelled to

* by Peter Coleman and Les Tanner, Cartoons of Australian History, Nelson. $3.95.1
apologise that it is not "sober and balanced". They fail to appreciate that cartoons are contemporary documents, not historical essays. Like any other historical documents they require selection and interpretation. A "cartoonists' history" is impossible simply because the newspaper cartoonist has never set out to be comprehensive. Though aware of this essential tendentiousness of the cartoonists these editors fail to draw the appropriate conclusions.

We can not expect the cartoonists to write history for us, but their perceptions and pre-occupations can give us insights into otherwise obscure issues. Coleman and Tanner have started with known history, classified it in arbitrary fashion, then tried to hunt out cartoons to illustrate every aspect. The result is some over-compressed and debatable history, tenuously related to a somewhat incoherent assortment of cartoons.

A historical work on Australian cartooning can be successful only if it begins with a thorough study of the cartoons themselves. This is the fundamental weakness of this book. Its authors have given no attention to the cartoonists, whose creativity and motivations should be basic to such a study. This is surprising, considering that one of the authors is a practising cartoonist.

If you are interested to know which cartoonists are represented you will find them neither named in the index nor acknowledged under their drawings. This omission disguises another weakness of the book—its wild imbalance. Tanner himself is represented by nineteen drawings and Norman Lindsay by twenty-two, while Bruce Petty rates a mere four and Molnar only two. Important artists such as Will Dyson, Percy Leason and Alex Gurney are missing altogether. The book does not claim to be a compendium of cartoonists or a history of cartooning, but these deficiencies are too great to be overlooked. Will Dyson was especially incisive and masterly as a caricaturist, bringing to maturity the trend begun by "Hop" and Phil May. Percy Leason, another of our most accomplished cartoonists, captured the interests, conflicts, crises and illusions of the 'twenties and 'thirties in a series of brilliantly satirical inventions. Alex Gurney, the creator of "Bluey and Curly", helped to perpetuate the image of the easy-going, fair-minded Australian character.

These are just some of the notable omissions from the ranks of the cartoonists. Just as serious are the omissions and imbalances of subject matter. Though these also are partly due to the pre-conceived scheme imposed on the material, much of the blame must be attributed to the obviously minimal research carried out for the book.
"Yes, you are improving the place, I'll have to increase your rent", by Percy Leason, *The Bulletin*, November 15, 1933.
The authors list Australia's three major political issues since Federation as conscription in World War I, the Depression, and the Age of Menzies. These themes could be well represented from the wealth of cartoons they engendered. Yet in this selection the personal antics of Billy Hughes receive as much attention as the conscription conflict. The Depression fares a little better, mainly through inclusion of Finey's telling contributions to the Labor Daily, but Percy Leason's political and social saga from The Bulletin is unaccountably missing.

The Age of Menzies is an indefinable sort of subject. The period and the politician are reasonably well covered, but the book avoids some recent issues of importance to both history and cartooning. Where for example are Petty's memorable and moving cartoons on the Vietnam war? Or some evidence of the campaign by Oz against censorship and conventional morality?

There is imbalance even within the work of individual artists. Norman Lindsay is well represented, but not by any of his numerous early attacks on monopoly and Australia's penetration by foreign capital. In other instances the text is belied by the pictorial material, particularly when assessment of the past is distorted by currently fashionable views of history. The worst to suffer in this way are the more radical trends. It is odd indeed to find the Labor Party described as "the main non-liberal party."

All this seems evidence that the volume has been hastily thrown together—a conclusion confirmed by the poor standard of production. Proof-reading is at a very low level, causing constant irritation and leaving some pictures wrongly labelled. Most of the cartoons are very badly reproduced. Some of the old wood engravings are printed in line, while others are reproduced in half-tone, with consequent loss of clarity. Excessive reduction of size may account for this treatment in some cases, but for other pictures the reasons remain elusive. It is interesting to notice that both of the books under review were printed in Hong Kong—and to contemplate what some of our earlier cartoonists might have made of the fact!

There is a risk that students and research workers will mistakenly treat any anthology of material from the past as an authentic historical source. It is a negative merit of Cartoons of Australian History that its defects eliminate such a risk. Meantime a comprehensive work on Australian cartooning has yet to make its appearance.