CHAPTER 23

FOR GOD'S SAKE KEEP US ENTERTAINED!

JOHN RICKARD

MOST AUSTRALIANS left their homes for work, but stayed in them for leisure. The wireless was a new focus for family relaxation, sharing with the piano or pianola an almost ceremonial pride of place. Even in the prime minister's lodge at Canberra the Lyons family gathered regularly for a singsong around the piano after dinner, with Dame Enid, according to *Pix*, calling the tune. A singsong differed from a musical evening, when individuals performed more self-consciously for a small living room circle. In the upper middle-class household of a Ballarat widow, Ilma Bailey, and her sister Dorothy Pinnock, 'music' took its place regularly among a range of evening pastimes. In her diary on a typical evening, Dorothy would write: 'We read, had music, and sewed', or 'In the evening we looked at postcards; then Ilma played Patience, I sewed. I wrote to Uncle Hal, and began Claire's letter'. The telephone had not yet challenged letter writing. Almost every evening was spent in this way: 'Uncle Harold and Ilma sang and Jen read. I sewed, and ran the gramophone'. Dorothy always 'ran the gramophone', and sometimes would say 'we had the wireless'.

Wireless weekly, *22 Apr 1938.*

Every day, throughout the continent, thousands of packs of cards were shuffled and dealt. They might be for respectable bridge afternoons, where tea rattled in on trolleys groaning with savouries and cream sponges, or humbler evenings of five hundred, preferred because bridge was 'too serious' for people who wanted, in the words of Molly Taylor, 'something that you can have a bit of fun out of'. In Perth Elsie Solly's father, a truckdriver,

> was a great bridge player, so that he was always playing bridge one night a week. The foursome either came to our home or we went to somebody else's home. I grew up in a world where I was just put on the floor on a mattress, or I could take a book and read it and watch them play bridge.

Such enthusiasts relished Agatha Christie's 1936 bridge table whodunit, *Cards on the table*, of which it was claimed 'that by carefully studying the players' scores (reproduced in the volume) alongside the text it is possible to come up with the right answer'.

Norm Bollenhagen took this photograph with his Kodak box camera in March at Henley Beach in Adelaide. His mother, Ellen, stands behind his son Malcolm and wife, Lil. It was Malcolm's birthday. Norm, a delicatessen proprietor, rarely took time off.
N. BOLLENHAGEN, 1938 COLLECTION

South Australian homes and gardens, *1 Feb 1938.*

For most housewives, Monday was for washing, Tuesday for ironing, and so on; for wage earners, work patterns were even more inflexible. Pay day was usually Friday, so Friday night and the weekend were the times for leisure. Most parents would not consider eating out, and the home remained the place to see relatives and friends. Clare Parr remembers that often 'you'd spend all Saturday afternoon cooking all the fancy cakes and what not', because Sunday was the day for visiting family. Cookery books and magazine columns offered plenty of recipes for 'fancy cakes' and 'whatnots', and convivial gatherings were more for eating than for drinking. Many homes were 'dry'. Sometimes Mum 'didn't go along with having drink in the house'; more often 'drinking' was considered inappropriate in a family setting. Those who did indulge at home tended to do so sparingly, not least because 'beer was a luxury' in many families. The rich, experimenting with cocktails, and the destitute, clutching their cheap wine or metho, were most likely to bring alcohol into their dwelling places.

About one in five Australian families had a car, and traffic accidents were beginning to attract attention. Car owners might go on picnics, and every capital city had its nearby 'hills' or 'mountains' for a Sunday afternoon's drive. Ernest Moroney's father even thought owning a car more important than owning a home, because the magical outings a car made possible could dissolve 'disharmony' in the family. Sometimes excursions might combine work and pleasure, as for Phyllis Uren in Darwin:

> the only time we used to go out together was when we had to go and get the hides from Koolpinyah and my mum'd go out with dad and the manager Billy Boy and make a day of it and then mum and us kids used to go and get the yabbies in the creek while dad and Bill used to load up . . .

For the majority without cars there might still be outings to nearby resorts on train and tram routes, or walks to a nearby beach or river. Surfing and sunbaking—water skiing was an American novelty—were almost obligatory for young people on the coast, while country towns were beginning to build municipal swimming pools. Bondi was a national symbol: in Perth Cottesloe proclaimed itself 'the Bondi of the West'. On weekends and public holidays people flocked to beaches to anoint their bodies and be immersed, the newspapers duly estimating the size of the crowds attending each resort. Going to the beach demanded a new range of accessories, from umbrellas, screens, wigwams and sleeping mats to beach bags and suntimers. In 1938 controversy raged about what the standards of dress on the beach should be, and in some places conventions had relaxed by the year's end. Men could now strut the sand brazenly topless in their trunks, though for women the new skirtless 'Canadian' costume was still daring. Advertisements for beachwear portrayed the beach and pool as places where the attractive young displayed their bodies with cheerful eroticism.

For most people annual holidays were out of the question, but remarkably many parents did manage to take their children away. The motor car was having an impact here, too, creating a new vogue for caravanning. According to the Launceston *Examiner* 'the long road, the road of the gypsy and the hobo the sundowner and the vagabond calls workers from office stools and machine shop benches, from pens and keyboards, from factories and shops and order books'. A caravan was cheap—in Perth, for example, a caravan could be hired for £3 to £5 a week—and caravans were also valued for reinforcing the family, because 'with a trailer you had privacy, comfort and solitude', a home on wheels free from the tyranny of unwelcoming hotels and boarding houses. The travel magazine *Walkabout* saw the 'growing popularity of caravanning' as 'to some extent, a

The Graham family went on a camping expedition to Yarrawonga on the Murray River. They drove in the family car, a Leon Bolle 4 cylinder '. . . 2400 cc with a 4 speed gate change gear box capable of 26 miles per gallon a trip from Melbourne to Yarrawonga, with a sankey cast wheels and drum brakes . . . Dad used to come home from work after 5 pm, we would have a light tea, then sleep to midnight, driving all night to get to the Murray at dawn with enough light to set up camp and cook breakfast, then getting to the fishing business. We always caught more fish than we could eat and gave heaps of fish to the Russell family in exchange for milk, butter, cream, homemade bread and cakes'.

R. GRAHAM, 1938 COLLECTION

Above.
'Happy Holidaymakers . . .' Misses H. Howard and Grace Pratten. Photograph by J.N. Tomlinson. South Australian homes and gardens, *Feb 1938.*

Right.
The Crystal Pool at Yanchep, Western Australia. Swimming trunks are in, but some older males still wear the full costume.
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT PRINTER

HOSIERY AND OTHER KNITTED GOODS

accepted as the official regulation swimming suits of the Australian Swimming Union and all affiliated bodies, and conform to the requirements of Federation Internationale de Natation Swimming Union.

The Company's manufactures include swimming suits, trunks, sports shirts, underwear, pullovers, lumber jackets and cardigans, which have become well known throughout Australia.

SPEEDO SWIM SUITS AND SPORTS

Made in Australia, *Sydney 1938.*

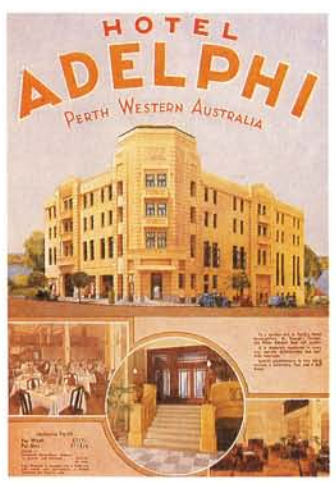
reaction against the hotel that is interested only in the bar trade', and it exhorted hotels to provide 'the most modern facilities', including beds that did not sag in the middle, and to grasp the potential for tourism.

The major holiday venues were guesthouses. Every state had its equivalent to the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, dotted with guesthouses or private hotels grand and modest. In Sumner Locke Elliott's *Edens lost*, set in 1938, there is a 'Hotel Ritz' at Medlow Bath in the Blue Mountains which 'had about it the feeling of mirrors and footmen'. The Victorian grandeur of its gables, cupolas, towers and balconies was to some extent diminished by its west wing, ruined by 'the great bush fire in the terrible dry summer of '28, ten years ago'. The chalet at Warburton in Victoria offered a croquet green, two tennis courts, a swimming pool, an eighteen-hole golf course and a stable of thirty horses. More standard guesthouses were rambling bungalows with long wide verandahs. Some establishments had a smart but raffish reputation: at the Hydro-Majestic at Medlow Bath—model for Elliott's fictional 'Ritz'—an early morning bell reportedly reminded guests that it was time to return to their own rooms. At Lorne, however, where Frank Beaurepaire owned the Grand Pacific Hotel and the Carinya Guesthouse and opened the New Cumberland in 1938, his daughter Lily saw to it that the young men were safely directed to their rooms at night. Most houses also observed a strict routine during the day. A gong summoned guests to meals, and those who were not prompt might find the dining room locked in their faces. Sports and games were similarly regulated. Many holidaymakers expected, even welcomed, such regimentation, and returned devoutly to the same guesthouse year after year.

Other leisure activities were also becoming industries. Essayist and professor of English, Walter Murdoch, writing his last article for the Melbourne *Argus* on 9 April, observed:

> It is a terrible time; but a terribly interesting time. Australia is mainly interested in test cricket. The nations are at one another's throats; Australians are at one another's cocktail parties. Australians are calling out—to their Press, to their cinemas, to their Broadcasting Commission: 'Excite us, entertain us, lull us with crooning, amuse us with simple jokes; for God's sake, keep us entertained!'

Perth's newly opened Hotel Adelphi, a stylish four-storey building situated on the city's 'finest thoroughfare', St George's Terrace, was 'modernly appointed', 'socially distinguished' and 'restfully luxurious'. Western Mail, *Christmas 1938.*



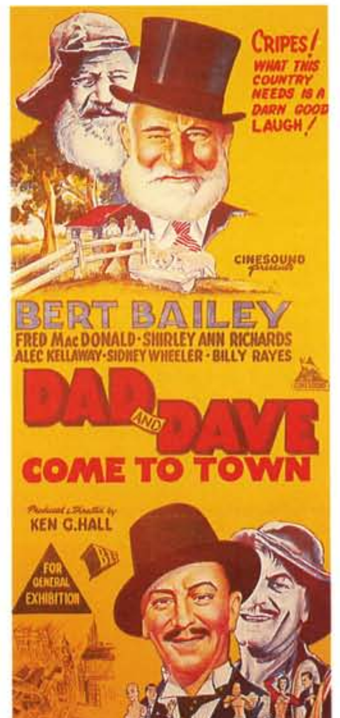
Right and opposite.
Patrons of the Ozone theatre in Broken Hill viewed the latest films at the Chinese Gardens open air theatre, which opened in November 1936, a few months after a conventional indoor theatre. Designed by the Adelaide architect E. Grant Walsh, the theatre on the corner of Blende and Cloride streets featured 'quaint Chinese heavens and hells, Buddhas . . . rockeries and flower gardens' with seating in 'comfortable deck chairs'. Photograph by L. Webber c1938; caption Barrier Daily Truth, *10 June 1936.*

The picture theatre was the great monument to keeping Australians entertained. Australians went to the 'films' or 'pictures' or 'flicks' so often that the trade sometimes talked loftily of the 'motion picture industry'. A hierarchy of picture theatres was well established, from great rococo city palaces, through suburban and country town theatres, to rougher establishments ranging from open-air theatres to country halls where the film projector broke down regularly. The few new cinemas built in 1938 forsook the palatial proportions of the 1920s 'States' and 'Capitols' for smaller, functional auditoriums with sleek, art deco lines and modern comforts, some including air-conditioning and a room to which mothers with crying babies could retreat.

A visit to a city picture show was an event, either as a romantic evening or as part of a day in town. The larger theatres offered orchestras and even variety acts; at the very least there would be the sugary thunder of a Wurlitzer organ, which might arise from a pit with a smiling organist attached. An usherette at such a theatre had a glamorous occupation. 'Usherettes do not spend all their time gorgeously gowned', *Pix* explained; 'they do not always smile', and Sydney Plaza had a 'flat' where they could rest. 'Make-up is almost as important to the usherette who smilingly shows you to your seat as to the actress.' The uniformed lady with the torch was part of the drama of cinema.

At a city theatre a hit film might run for months, at suburban or country cinemas the program could change three times a week. It was the local picture theatre, within walking distance of home, which provided the archetypal cinema experience. Friday and Saturday were the big nights; some people had regular bookings. Order and decorum were sometimes a problem, particularly in the back stalls, though some managements provided 'loveseats' for two. Saturday children's matinees were bedlam. As cartoons and serials exploded on to the screen, the local kids, their fingers sticky with Fantails and Violet Crumbles, roared as one.

What audiences, young and old, saw on the screen did not vary greatly throughout Australia. According to W.H. Croll the open-air theatre at the Alice provided its 'many-coloured patrons with Wild West drama', and in Darwin films were vetted before being shown to Aboriginal audiences. But most Australians saw the familiar Hollywood stars who monopolised popular fantasies. 1938 was the



'The third in Cinesound's Dad and Dave *films had little in common with Steele Rudd's stories, being based instead on one of director Ken Hall's favourite comic formulas, the fish out of water. Believing that the rural setting was exhausted after the popularity of* Dad and Dave *on radio and in the two earlier films, Hall moved the main location to a city. Dad unexpectedly inherits a women's fashion store and the family moves there to take charge. Entwistle, an effeminate floorwalker, helps the Rudds to foil a plot by a rival firm—run by a migrant with a strong accent—to put the store out of business. The Rudds win, and Dad returns to the farm leaving the store in the capable hands of his daughter Jill.' A. Pike and R. Cooper,* Australian film 1900–1977, *1981. Cinesound poster printed by Robert Burton Pty Ltd.*
NATIONAL LIBRARY

year of 'the Durban wonder', Deanna Durban, in *100 men and a girl* and *Mad about music*, and the year Danielle Darrieux was introduced to English-speaking audiences in *The rage of Paris. Man* thought her 'the essence of everything that is feminine charm', and Nettie Palmer, who occasionally joined her husband Vance when he went as a reviewer, described the film, though it might have applied to Darrieux too, as 'really attractive and steady on its pins'. Garbo was *Maria Waleswka*, Norma Shearer *Marie Antoinette* and Errol Flynn *Robin Hood*—in technicolour, no longer a novelty. The hit of the year was Walt Disney's first full-length feature, *Snow White and the seven dwarfs.* Even the Sydney University student paper, *Honi Soit*, honoured it as 'magnificent entertainment', and all Australia whistled 'Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go...'

Fewer Australian films were being made. Cinesound was still producing, but there was a hint of desperation in Ken Hall's *Lovers and luggers* claiming success on notching up a second week at the Brisbane Tivoli. *On our selection* was revived, and later in the year *Dad and Dave come to town* was released. At less salubrious theatres such as the Capitol and Lyric in Sydney they were boisterously received, but elsewhere they seemed a cause for embarrassment. For *Table talk, On our selection* was 'this freak film', perhaps partly in reference to its modest financial success, while the commonwealth film censor, Cresswell O'Reilly, wondered aloud whether he could pass again a film which might, under censorship regulations, be regarded 'as prejudicial to the interest and reputation of the Commonwealth'. O'Reilly would have felt more at home with Frank Hurley's *A nation is built*, released in October for the sesquicentenary. According to the trade journal, *Film weekly*, it 'exploited the patriotic angle with a finesse that saw an absence of ostentatious flag-waving, but which inspires the patriot with a powerfully overwhelming force'. It was claimed that audiences applauded it. Dad and Dave, on the other hand, evoked rorty hilarity from their patrons.

Dancing was not quite as universal. Some devout Protestants still disapproved, and some Australians were reluctant to risk exposure on a public dance floor. Nevertheless for small communities, for many middle-aged and for most young people, dancing was a great outlet, even a passion. Hollywood had reinforced its association with romance, and it was also promoted as 'health giving': 'after a day of sitting at an office desk, perhaps huddled over a typewriter there is nothing better than an evening on the dance-floor', particularly in winter when 'outdoor sport is often impossible'. Leonard Scott was quite happy for his wife to go to the Friday night RSL dance in Darwin with a girlfriend ('she was keen on dancing, I wasn't'), while he went off 'to play snooker or billiards or something', picking her up later.

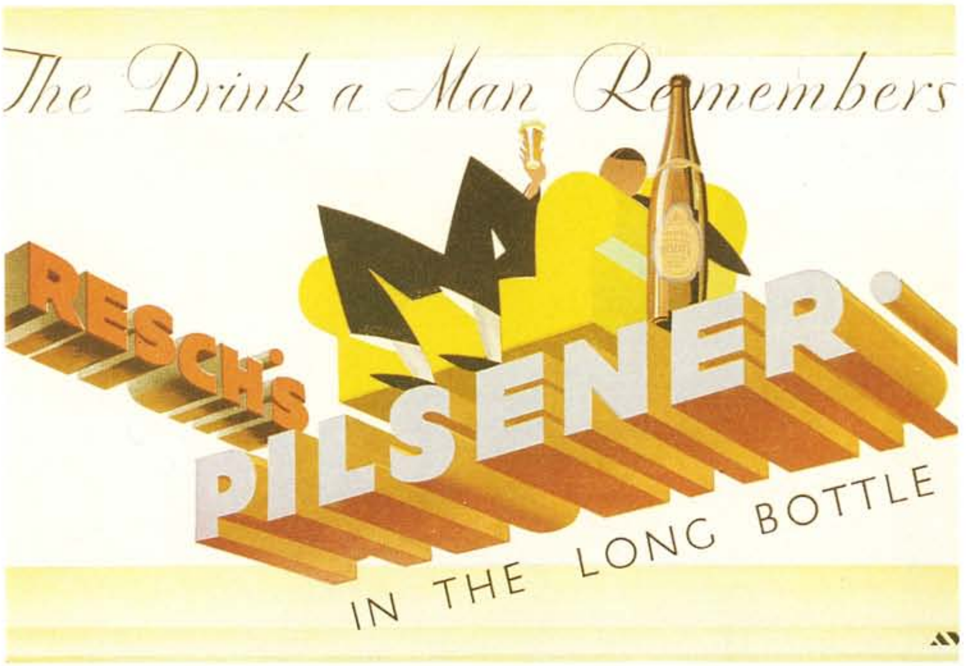
Dances were major social events. Newspapers listed a multitude of balls and dances organised by clubs, schools, charities and churches. In Launceston the Women's Pioneer Committee hosted the Early Settlers' Ball in the presence of the acting governor. It had a period flavour, with a formally staged minuet and huntsmen who appeared in costume while glee singers entertained with 'To the kill'. An unusual feature was the appearance of a chain gang, allegedly a tribute to the convict labour which built 'many roads, homesteads and bridges', but an interlude which may have caused momentary uneasiness for at least some of those present. At the other end of the social scale was the Fremantle Young People's Ideal Club, which held dances for those with little to spend. Members did the catering ('we had just a nice supper, perhaps ice cream and things like that', Frances Shea recalls) and everyone 'had a really good time'.

In the cities were great temples of dance, such as the Embassy in Perth, the Palais de Danse in Melbourne and the Trocadero in Sydney, huge echoing spaces

Cecil Miles, a Sydney dance studio proprietor, introduced dances that reflected the 'unrestrained zest of negroes' in New York. These clients of the studio, however, do the 'London Bridge'. Pix, *12 Mar 1938.*

resembling art deco aeroplane hangars. Here big bands brayed, singers crooned into microphones, and crowds flocked for a night of glitter and glamour. Perhaps the finest band was Frank Coughlan's at the Trocadero. Coughlan's heart lay with traditional jazz: 'his sax playing was good, his trumpet was beautiful, but his trombone was thrilling'. In 1938 he assembled an all-girl band at the Trocadero: although in part a stunt, it showed that women jazz musicians were now part of the scene. More commercially successful was Jim Davidson's band, which had been taken up by the ABC. Its records were best-sellers, second to the Hollywood tenor Allan Jones, but eclipsing the screen love-song team Jeannette McDonald and Nelson Eddy.

Dance programs made varying compromises between old and new. The new dance was the Big Apple, which allegedly took its name from the 'negro dance-hall where it began'. A 'new version of old-time square dance', it comprised some



BP magazine, *1 June 1938.*

Film weekly, *6 June 1938.*

half-dozen steps ranging from an updated Charleston to an individual 'shine', 'truckin'' and 'peckin'' (fowl movements). The new dances seemed passing novelties rather than serious challenges to the traditional dance repertoire, but there were also growing numbers of jitterbugs, a new breed who rejected the tyranny of the dancing schools and the ballroom steps they taught. In some halls jitterbugs were seen as a contaminating influence and were quarantined in a specially roped-off section.

Suburban and country dances had just as devoted a following. The music might be humbler—three or four players perhaps, or in the bush just a pianist or a gramophone with a big speaker. The dances were usually 'dry', though men might retire at intervals to the local pub, either returning charged up for another whirl around the floor, or not returning at all, and sometimes the music in the hall could not drown the sound of fights outside. Class distinctions were often apparent. According to Laurie Crump, a 24-year-old shop assistant in Boort, Victoria,

> The top end of the hall was held by the snobs, men in their swallow tails, partners in evening frocks—one side the so-called middle class—the other side the working class—men in their pullovers and sports gear, ladies in home made frocks. The single working yokel too afraid to dance—it meant getting too close to the girls—stood at the entrance and with arms folded just watching.

Dances and parties were also held in homes and woolsheds. James Burrow of Penshurst taught himself the piano-accordion from a book, and became a member of an amateur band which got itself invited to local parties. They drove about in a seven-seater Buick which cost £25 and ran on kerosene.

Like dancing, beer was promoted as good for you. Foster's Lager was 'healthful and nourishing', while Tooth's Sheaf Stout was on a par with Milo—'a glass', said the advertisements, 'is the pleasant way to ensure sound sleep'. Most drinking was done in pubs by men. Six o'clock closing, introduced during the war and still in force in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, gave a quality of hurried and noisy conviviality to a drink after work, when crowds of men, most wearing

hats, would struggle to get the barmaid's attention. At only a few hotels with decent lounges was it proper for women to join the men; in the country women commonly sat in the car while husbands drank.

The further one got from the cities, the less likely were the drinking laws to be observed. Sally Peck, a barmaid, declared that 'seven days and seven nights you could get a drink at the Southport hotel providing you knew where to wake the barman up'. The barman might, understandably, be 'terribly grumpy' at being woken in the middle of the night, but he knew where his duty lay. Frontier cities like Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill were notorious for being a law unto themselves. An English visitor writing as 'the Prying Pommy' thought that 'drinking at Kalgoorlie has ceased to be a pleasure or even a nice robust vice'. It was 'often only a senseless and undiscriminating guzzle'. When Methodist clergy protested at the illegal Sunday opening of pubs in Kalgoorlie, an ingenuous police official explained that 'if the hotels were shut up, many of the men would go to sly grog shops and would be free from any kind of police supervision'. The same logic applied to two-up. A school operating in Kalgoorlie untroubled by police was 'the recognised place', the Prying Pommy was told; others attempting to open a ring were 'closed up pretty quick'. A policeman's lot was not an unhappy one in such a town.

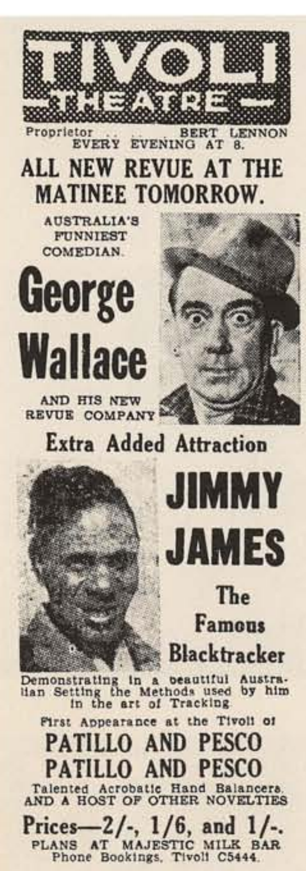
South Australian homes and gardens, *Apr 1938.*

Drinking and gambling laws were always controversial. Extended hotel hours were being introduced in Tasmania, and Victoria was given the opportunity to vote on prohibition, which it rejected. Legal offcourse betting existed in South Australia and Tasmania but not elsewhere, and illegal starting price bookmaking flourished everywhere else. There was outrage in Sydney when it was alleged that some bookies in industrial suburbs were using children as runners. From time to time police would raid the 'hundreds of ... secret gambling haunts [which] honeycomb the city and suburbs', or harass so-called nightclubs for breaching liquor laws, but the random way in which the law was enforced led to cynicism.

Sydney Sun, *25 Apr 1938.*

Less controversial were the traditional festivals dotting the calendar—the shows, country town carnivals and commemorative holidays. The show was a reconciliation of city and bush. More than 35 000 people flocked to Launceston's three-day show, the gate receipts being the highest since 1919, and if the ring events celebrated the man on the land, sideshow alley reflected a bizarre image of urban intensity. The freaks and oddities assembled were viewed with unabashed curiosity. The giant crocodile from northern Queensland, allegedly the same monster that 'ate the Italian Schoolboy at Ingham', was deemed 'interesting and educational'; while a 'Pinhead Chinaman' and a 'Chinese Midget' ('little men from China that will please and entertain you') competed for attention with a 'Headless Woman' from Patagonia who boasted a perfect figure and a diet of 'milk, soup, rice, sago, stewed fruit, minced meat, scrambled eggs, whitebait and curried oysters'.

'Fremantle Week' was observed in January; Rockhampton in Queensland held its show and its 34th 'Gala Week' in June; and in August–September Kalgoorlie was the headquarters for a 'Back to the Goldfields Carnival'. This was launched in Perth by the release of twenty champion goldfield homing pigeons at a ceremony presided over by the lieutenant-governor, Sir James Mitchell, who later travelled to Kalgoorlie himself. An exhausting program included processions by day and night, concerts, race meetings, sports events, a 'Miss Goldfields' competition, an aero-pageant, reunions, balls and performances by Wirth's Circus. So demanding was the pace that interest and organisation seemed at times to flag. The Perth Trades Hall Band faced only a 'handful of persons' at the Boulder Town Hall (had band concerts gone out of fashion in Boulder, the *Kalgoorlie Miner* wondered), a commemorative 'Gold Rush' got under way late and was pronounced a failure, and a corroboree performed by ten dispirited Aborigines at the Golden Mile



Adelaide News, *24 June 1938.*

trotting track did not live up to expectations. A much more acceptable Aboriginal contribution was a concert by well-drilled children from the Mount Margaret mission. Their program included choral numbers, 'humorous dialogues', playettes and displays in mental arithmetic; one item entitled 'Ten little choir boys', 'a sort of song sketch adapted from "Ten little nigger boys"', was remarked on.

The old festival of labour, Eight Hour Day, was now usually called Labour Day. It still commanded respect. In Melbourne the march emphasised the unions' commitment to the struggle against war and fascism. In Ballarat a three-kilometre-long procession represented 'The March of Progress'; Ilma Bailey generously allowed her maid, Marjorie, to go along to see it. Darwin's Labour Day was observed on 4 July, and Dorothy Spalding, housekeeping for the administrator, regretted that she was unable to see the parade, but made up for it by attending the 'huge programme of sports' in the afternoon, accompanied by Sadie Herbert, wife of Xavier. St Patrick's Day was another survivor, though it seemed now to be principally sustained by the Catholic schools. In Rockhampton floats ranged from the 'Tumble Down Shack of Mother McCrea' to 'Memories of Erin', though for many the memories stemmed more from the classroom than the home. On the other hand a folklore had gathered around the peculiar blend of solemnity and abandonment which marked the observance of Anzac Day. When the marching was done and the proper rites observed, the pubs opened, two-up schools materialised in the streets, and men dressed as for church cavorted and sang in public, some even rolling up their trousers to reveal their suspender-held socks.

Labour Day and Anzac Day were principally male affairs, but women found expression in no less significant rituals. Community singing, dominated by women, was still celebrated in some working-class suburbs, while a day in town with women friends had its own folklore—the preparations, the journey, the street photographers, the tour of the department stores, and (in Sydney) either a genteel lunch at Cahills, famous for its caramel ice cream cake, or, more basic, a meat pie at Sargents.

Women were also said to be bringing prosperity to the wrestling, which *Pix* reported was 'enjoying an unprecedented revival'. Every third spectator was female, and women 'took an interest in wrestling because it was bloodless but full of excitement and thrills'. American wrestlers led an eastern circuit which, aided by the new aeroplane services, linked Sydney, Melbourne, Broken Hill, Newcastle and Brisbane. Matches were often broadcast. On 21 May, W.H. Croll, camped somewhere between Coober Pedy and the Alice, sat up late listening to Eric Welch's description of one choreographed affray. Ice skating was booming too, and many girls were attracted to the rinks by Sonja Henie beckoning on the screen across *Thin ice*. Cycling was also enjoying a vogue among women. Such healthy pursuits suited the image of the new 'bachelor girl', who was also seen in cigarette advertisements langorously inhaling—Black and White, for example, was 'the man's cigarette women enjoy'. The bachelor girl might possibly run to a flat, but *Pix*'s fictional salesgirl, Jean, could only afford a room, and she rolled her own cigarettes. Jean's austere weekly budget contrasted oddly with the glamorous picture of the model savouring 'the last cigarette before bed... when sleepy stirring thoughts are pleasant'.

The 'arts'—theatre, music, art and literature—still had a popular face, although confined to a minority artistic community marooned in the wider culture. Theatre still sustained a tradition of variety and vaudeville. Roy Rene ('Mo') and George Wallace were popular figures whose humour and idiom working-class Australians in particular responded to. Yet the cinema and the depression had eroded theatre's mass audience. Necessarily more expensive, theatre was essentially respectable and

upper middle class, presided over by 'the Firm', J.C. Williamson. The Firm had managed to weather the depression only by disposing of its cinema interests. Now it boasted such attractions as the exotic Covent Garden Russian Ballet, the acclaimed solo actress Ruth Draper, an English company headed by Fay Compton, and Clare Booth's mildly controversial play *The women*, notable for its large all-female cast including six American 'stars' (all hitherto unknown) and the frankness of its dialogue.

An enormous gulf lay between this commercial, imported theatre and local amateur acting. The repertory movement had failed to put down roots in Australia, and groups such as the Gregan McMahon Players in Melbourne and Doris Fitton's Independent Theatre in Sydney occupied a bleak no-man's-land between professional and amateur theatre. They chose unadventurous plays—G.B. Shaw, J.B. Priestley—or romps such as *1066 and all that.* More newsworthy was the small political theatre, principally represented by the dedicated ideologues of the New Theatre. Clifford Odets' *Till the day I die* was performed by both Sydney and Melbourne groups: it was 'almost too real', Nettie Palmer recorded. Betty Roland won the West Australian Drama Festival Competition with a play earnestly entitled *Are you ready comrade*, and the ambivalent response of the *West Australian* critic reflected the gap between the committed and the middle-class audience: 'the play expresses dissatisfaction with the present social order', the critic noted, 'while a large part of the audience probably feel quite smug about it'. But he also complained that the play lacked an Australian resonance: it did not speak to Australians, but rather purported to speak for them. Only in radio, thanks to the ABC, did real opportunities exist for the local playwright. Australian actors were left to find their tradition in the superficial skills of survival which the thin local theatre made necessary. For the Palmers, disappointed protagonists of an Australian drama, the great theatrical event of 1938 was watching the Russian Dolia Ribush impart a new intensity of dramatic experience in rehearsing *The cherry orchard.*

In music there was a similar disparity between the glittering schedule of visiting 'celebrities' and the local scene. J. and N. Tait brought out both the 'screen-star singer', Lawrence Tibbett, who gave 'thirteen super-popular concerts', and the great Wagnerian soprano, Kirsten Flagstad. The ABC's imports included conductors Malcolm Sargent and George Szell, and singers Richard Tauber (36 concerts from coast to coast), Alexander Kipnis and Dino Borgioli. Here was a roll-call of names enough to make Australians feel they were on the map. 'Music is entering our daily lives more and more', the Melbourne city organist enthused, 'our enthusiasm is genuine and our taste is for the best'.

Yet English music critic Neville Cardus argued that Australian music should be developed by fostering local talent in lieder singing and chamber music, and founding one good orchestra with a good permanent conductor. Some of the 'celebrities' endorsed this concern. Tibbett said that he had heard 'some excellent voices while I was in Sydney ... but I couldn't prophesy that they were ordained to become great singers', while Borgioli, noting the lack of work for local artists, hoped for 'a national opera assisted by Government contributions'.

Though resident in the United States, Percy Grainger spent several months of 1938 in Australia, principally to see his museum at the University of Melbourne completed. He is pictured here with his wife Ella outside the museum, not long before it opened.

GRAINGER MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Such a suggestion seemed outlandish. Encouraging music meant local music clubs or annual eisteddfods. Dorothy Pinnock was the enthusiastic organiser of the Ballarat Music Club, while Melbourne's club for women university graduates, the Lyceum, had a busy music circle. Ballarat's renowned South Street Eisteddfod was a matter for intense local pride, and throughout the commonwealth other eisteddfods had thousands of competitors. Yet such events were more a celebration of amateurism than a means of fostering professional musicians. Ilma Bailey timed a holiday to Sydney so that she could attend five Flagstad concerts, and also donated

£20 for a piano, violin and cello trio section in the South Street Eisteddfod. Sponsoring amateurs was thought to be an adequate way to advance music.

The major music patron was the ABC, where the composer W.J. James was federal controller of music. The ABC employed musicians on a regular basis in its six symphony orchestras and in groups such as Jim Davidson's Dance Band. It also engaged performers for special broadcasts and aired the works of Australian composers. Even so, Alfred Hill and Margaret Sutherland were little known, and Australia boasted only one composer of international reputation, Percy Grainger. Some of Grainger's music was popular, and he saw it as Australian, but he had no alternative but to earn his living elsewhere.

Australian art, through the pastoral images of artists such as Streeton, Heysen and Gruner, reached a wider public, and Albert Namatjira, an Aboriginal from central Australia, gave his first exhibition in Melbourne, but younger artists were seeking new directions and techniques. They rejected the notion of an official Academy of Art which the artistic establishment, mobilised by R.G. Menzies, had launched in 1937. George Bell, whose Melbourne art school was one of the few local havens for modernism, saw the academy as guilty of 'the sanctification of banality and the strict preservation of mediocrity', and in 1938 sounded the call to arms which led

Grace Cossington Smith, Orchestral concert: Dr Sargent in the town hall, *c1939, Sydney. Oil on cardboard, mounted on board. By 1938 Cossington Smith had gained a reputation as a leader among the Sydney modernist painters. Born in Sydney in 1892, she exhibited at the Walker Gallery, London, in 1932 and held several exhibitions at the Macquarie Galleries, Sydney.*

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL GALLERY

to the forming of the Contemporary Art Society. In September the art critic for the Melbourne *Herald*, Basil Burdett, arrived in London with a commission from Sir Keith Murdoch, the most powerful local patron of modernism, to gather paintings for a major exhibition of contemporary French and British art planned for 1939.

Writers also were organising. The Sydney-based Fellowship of Australian Writers sent a deputation to the prime minister, Joseph Lyons, seeking a £16 000 annual grant to encourage Australia's literature: included in the proposal were a university chair of Australian literature, pensions for aged and disabled writers, an annual £1000 literary prize and the publication of ten books a year. There was no immediate response. Melbourne writers set up a Victorian branch of the fellowship, and a circular sent out under Frederick Macartney's name declared that membership would be restricted to writers of definite standing. The professionals were seeking to define themselves.

Although some magazines, among them the *Australian journal*, the *Bulletin*, *The home* and *Man*, published short stories by local writers, Australian books had comparatively little impact. In 1938 few gained much press attention—H.V. Evatt's *Rum rebellion*, A.P. Elkin's *The Australian Aborigines*, the latest novel by Ion Idriess, *Madman's island* and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*. Ilma Bailey, who belonged to a reading circle, read only one book which related to Australia, and that was written by an Englishman—Thomas Wood's *Cobbers*. Yet she was not unaware of Australian literature. Her diary includes a brief list of Australian poets, Christopher Brennan, Hugh McCrae, Shaw Neilson and Bernard O'Dowd, and in June her sister Dorothy noted the death of C.J. Dennis. Ilma's reading ranged from Oliver Goldsmith to Winston Churchill and Philip Gibbs, but most Australians were drawn to library shelves marked 'Romance', 'Adventure', 'Detective' or 'Wild West'. It was sometimes claimed that world events were encouraging a tendency to more serious reading—the popularity of some of the recently introduced Penguin paperbacks was noted—but the Launceston City Library reported that 90 per cent of its loans were in fiction, and the small commercial libraries knew that romance and adventure were best for business. Some librarians and academics were voicing concern at the poor library facilities in Australia.

Street in Surry Hills (self portrait), *1938 (detail). Oil on hessian on hardboard. A trickle of refugee artists gave Australia fleeting contact with modern European art. The dashing Cossack artist Danila Vassilieff, who arrived in Australia in the early 1920s, caused surprise by choosing to paint scenes of slum life. A fascinated Nettie Palmer noted the 'effect of Holy Russia in colouring and even design, telegraph poles looking like crosses'. Born in Russia in 1897, Vassilieff had no formal training in art.*

NEWCASTLE REGIONAL ART GALLERY

The staple reading of most people remained the daily and weekly newspapers, magazines and comics. Among the weeklies were the larrikinish *Smith's weekly*, the now conservative *Bulletin* and the newly launched *Pix*, the magazine 'just like a newsreel', while hundreds of thousands of women (and men) had become addicted to the *Women's weekly* since its launching in 1933. *Man* (1936) was another newcomer to the newsstands, and although it had a strong political and literary flavour, its 'girlie' cartoons and occasional tasteful nude ensured it a place in many barber shops. A wide range of imported American magazines was in fact censored. With titles like *Candid confessions*, *Dime detective* and *Breezy stories*, some 70 of these magazines were banned, with apparent widespread approval. According to the *Bulletin* 'the peddling of aphrodisiacs in literary or pictorial form is foreign to the traditional practice of every branch of the English speaking race'; it was really 'the great melting pot experiment' in the United States that was to blame for the rash of these magazines. The *Women's weekly* hoped that the bans would lead to 'a still more thorough investigation' of debased types of imported reading matter.

Australian minority groups had their own forms of recreation. For the rich, with time at their disposal, leisure was particularly important. Diana Howell grew up on a Western District property where young people had good times on the tennis court or by the swimming pool, mixing only with people from similar backgrounds. Even Ilma Bailey in Ballarat, who hardly aspired to be a society lady,

employed two maids and a chauffeur/gardener, who made possible a much more active social life than most Australians enjoyed. The rich were very mobile. They travelled to and from city and country, interstate and abroad. They owned motor cars, and the newspaper social pages constantly reported the lunches, afternoon teas and cocktail parties that marked their comings and goings. While the great ocean liner was still the essential symbol of this mobility, air travel was beginning to make an impression. When Lauré Falkiner, daughter of a Riverina squatter, visited friends in central Queensland, she flew; once her father wired for a Butler's plane to fetch her.

Most people travelling interstate went by train or ship, but now airliners competed. Australian National Airways flew its first Douglas DC3 in 1937. Interstate road travel was less popular because most 'highways' rarely lived up to their name and frequently became impassable in bad weather. Western Mail, *Christmas 1937.* Launceston Examiner annual, *October 1938.* South Australian homes and gardens, *1 Dec 1938.*

Bohemians too found a special virtue in not living as others lived. According to the writer Hal Porter, 'the attics and back rooms of Little Collins Street are rented by young artists of every sort who use the places as studios, love-nests, pieds-a-tierre away from mum and dad, or merely settings for booze-ups'. Nearby were such favourite haunts as Gino Nibbi's Leonardo bookshop and the Cafe Petrushka. Bohemia could happily pursue its concerns for the most part ignored by society at large. The annual Artists' Ball in Sydney might raise an eyebrow or two, but the general indifference to the arts guaranteed writers and artists a measure of freedom.

This freedom made Australia attractive to some European refugees. The European presence, although still small, was evident. *Pix* not only noted that spaghetti was now manufactured in Australia, but also claimed, on the basis of slim evidence, that 'Australians are rapidly developing a Continental taste for snails'. Even King's Cross, that haven for foreigners and bohemians, could be celebrated in *Home*, a monthly version of the overseas *Vogue*.

Students also were a privileged elite, encouraged by their mentors to savour the university experience both at work and at play. Political clubs and university revues commented critically on society, but by and large students did not see themselves as rebels; on the contrary, they were inclined to see society as judging them. The Sydney Students' Representative Council was greatly concerned that floats in its Festival Day procession might offend public taste, and censored them. 'We are to appear before the eyes of the City', the student paper *Honi Soit* explained pompously,

> and the City, which like the vast majority of mankind ignores the command 'Judge Not', is to make a judgement upon us for our wit and bearing. The nature of the impression we make is in the hands of each student taking part in the procession.

Honi Soit had a strong sense of propriety. 'Discussions on religious matters have no place in a paper which exists to serve all students', it warned. Politics too was 'far from being a central interest of students', although the paper did concede that 'in these troubled times, to adopt the position of disregarding it altogether would be ostrich-like'.

Yet in a sense all these cultural minorities existed on sufferance. Even the rich, who had the least reason to feel vulnerable, wanted to be seen as much the same as other Australians. If the dominant values of Australian society were perceived to be under attack, it was by the contaminating influence of cheap American culture, not by local minorities. Some people feared that American influences would undermine the British heritage; others agreed with the American actress, Ruth Draper, who thought that Australia was a country 'very like our own, the people like our Westerners'. But even she remarked patronisingly that 'the poor things get nothing but movies, and are mad about my shows'. Yet while that self-appointed arbiter of public taste, the *Women's weekly*, complained that 'we are

Francis Broadhurst's version of King's Cross. 'King's Cross is the ultimate height of heterogeneity. It is a salamagundi [sic] of caviar, truffles and fish and chips. It is a cocktail of rum, tomato sauce, raspberry vinegar and Chateau Lafite. It is a bouquet of rhododendrons, forget-me-nots, stinging nettles and pansies. Francis Broadhurst shows it above. Examine it thoroughly for types.' Home, *Dec 1938.*

King's Cross provided a touch of colour: it did not pose a threat. And if there were 'pansies' in the bouquet, for the great majority of Australians the small homosexual world did not even exist.

in danger of becoming a cultural suburb of Hollywood', it devoted more than four pages to movie news, gossip and reviews. There were queues, not picket lines, outside the picture theatres showing *Snow White and the seven dwarfs.*

An outline of Australian leisure might suggest that most Australians were enjoying the same sorts of things, whether a day on the beach or a night at the pictures. Yet Palm Beach was different from Bondi, and people who sat in the dress circle looked down, literally, on the hoi polloi in the front stalls. A suburban life anchored to home, garden and perhaps church was unlike life in the inner suburbs where the culture of the street predominated, and to go dancing to the sound of a big city band was not like stepping it out in a country hall. What Australians did share, perhaps, was a cultural innocence born of distance and dependence. 'There can never be anything like it again', wrote Ruth Draper while under a hair dryer, 'for I can't expect such wholesale hunger and childlike delight and spiritual and intellectual yearning in any of the old countries—here one feels the immense potential qualities of strong, unsophisticated people'.

Nineteen-year-old Betty Bertram sits beside the wireless reading her copy of the Broadcaster. *She worked as a dressmaker at her home in Palmyra near Perth.*

E. WILLIAMS, 1938 COLLECTION