JOAN KERR - A SINGULAR VOICE
ESSAYS ON AUSTRALIAN ART & ARCHITECTURE
Edited by Candice Bruce, Dinah Dysart and Jo Holder Power
$59.95

Associate Professor Joan Kerr (MA ’76) was the foremost feminist voice of her generation in the minefield of Australian art. And it was a fearless, polemical and entertaining voice. In a 1999 essay in Art and Australia, for instance, she wrote “I stopped approving of icons when they became flavour of the month with journalists, when the word started to mean ‘mentioned more than once in this week’s newspapers’ and was more often applied to footballers than to works of art.” She then goes on to talk about what she considers to be the only genuinely iconic Australian artwork – the 200 burial poles of The Aboriginal Memorial in the NGA, Canberra. She has no time for what she calls “chocolate box” art (the pretties of colonial times).

Kerr, who died in 2004, left nothing unexamined or unanalysed in Australian art and architecture, and while she sanged many (white male) establishment feathers with her take-no-prisoners style and uncompromising scholarship, she also inspired fresh thinking and efforts from her students and admirers. This collection of her considered views is beautifully presented, well illustrated and a fine and much deserved memorial to a great original.

MARTIN WESTLEY TAKES A WALK
Andrew Humphreys
Vintage Books $32.95

Andrew Humphreys (BA ’91 LLB ’93) describes himself, tongue in cheek, as a “full-time father who writes books occasionally”. With two well-received novels behind him – The Weight of the Sun (2001) and Wonderful (2004) – that quirky voice is becoming a welcome one in OzLit. His latest novel is at once similar in its language, off-the-wall schema and humour, and completely different.

Martin Westley is an unlikely hero: a middle-aged man of no consequence, ambition or colour whose life is turned upside down when he is hit on the head by an out-of-control kite while walking on the cliffs near Clovelly. The blow to his head results in an odd kind of amnesia: he can remember trivia and ephemera, but has no memory of his wife, mistress, kids, friends or day-to-day life.

As he explores his life it becomes apparent to the reader that Martin is the kind of slightly melancholy, ineffectual man who would drive anyone to drink; at the same time his family and work lives are – or were – enough to make any man melancholy.

What happens as Martin slips into another way of being via a Stetson hat found in an op shop makes for a delightful and unusual journey through contemporary Sydney.

TOM WILLS – HIS SPECTACULAR RISE AND TRAGIC FALL
Greg de Moore
Allen & Unwin $32.95

Dr Greg De Moore’s day job is at the University’s Western Clinical School, Westmead Hospital, where he lectures in psychiatry. This discipline was probably very useful for his understanding of Tom Wills: the man whose tumultuous life has occupied a lot of the rest of his life for some years.

Wills was Australia’s first superstar sportsman and makes today’s pampered heroes look like wusses. In summer he was the country’s greatest cricketer, in winter he virtually invented Australian Rules football and was a star player. He was also a controversial figure because of his true egalitarianism and promotion of Aborigines in the cricketing life.

One hundred and fifty years on from his forgotten life and savage, booze-fuelled suicide, Greg de Moore has grabbed this extraordinary man from obscurity and given him the biography of dreams.

His research is remarkable – medical records, letters, schoolboy diary, all hitherto overlooked or mislaid – and he writes beautifully. The result is a fascinating book about a time and a man whose influence resonate today. While Tom Wills is a must-read for cricketing and footy fans, it’s also a work of luscious excellence for anyone interested in Australia’s history and society of the mid-1800s.

All reviews by Diana Simmonds

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LETTERS HOME – TO MOTHER FROM GALLIPOLI AND BEYOND
Edited by Doug & Margot Anthony
Allen & Unwin, $35

The publisher’s description of the authors and the book is a gem: “Doug Anthony wanted to be a farmer but became Deputy Prime Minister of Australia. He is Sapper Hubert Anthony’s son. Margot Anthony (BA ’53) loves books, music and cows from a distance. For twenty-seven years she juggled the demands of her husband’s political life with that of their home. Together Doug and Margot have pieced together these faded fragments of their family.”

The resulting book is a touching and illuminating memorial to the 14-year-old boy who left home for a job as a telegraph boy, enlisted in the AIF at 17 and began writing letters home to his mother from Gallipoli. Somehow the letters, his diary and a bundle of postcards survived in a small suitcase in a barn. They now reveal much about that time and about a young man’s relationship with his much loved mother: left behind to endure the hard bush life and lonely fears as “the Great War” wreaked havoc on Australia’s families and future.

SYDNEY BEACHES AND BODYSURFING
Robyn Ianssen
From: rianssen@hotmail.com
$30 + postage

This last Australian summer has been one of the worst on record for drownings and other beach disasters, most of which should have been avoidable if people knew better. Robyn Ianssen (BA ’60) has put together a book that could help frolickers avoid some of the lurking perils and also improve enjoyment of the beach and ocean. Find out how to body surf, how not to body surf; what to look out for and avoid – from bluebottles to dumpers. There are photographs, line drawings and lots of good tips and advice for water lovers from beginners to the dangerously complacent.

TWO DOGS & A GARDEN
Derelie Cherry
Paradise Publishers $49.95

Marrying plant breeder Bob Cherry changed Derelie Evely’s (PhD ’04) life for good. The former publishing executive found herself on hunting expeditions in Vietnam, PNG, China, Italy, Portugal … wherever Cherry thought there might be something interesting or rare to bring home to Australia. His dictum of one cutting for me, one for the Royal Botanical Gardens has yielded an extraordinary collection for both places. The Cherrys now literally live in Paradise – 92h at Kulnura, inland from the NSW central coast.

The book documents their plant lives and the life of the gardens (and commercial nursery) in all its seasons and colours, including bushfire. It is whimsical, informative, inspiring and, with the masses of well reproduced colour photography, quite beautiful. Paradise is open to the public on the first weekends in May, August and October.

YOU DESERVE DESSERT – FACT, FICTION & FABLE
Margaret Owen Ruckert
www.omargo.com.au

Owen Ruckert (BS Dip Ed ’71) has compiled a collection of poetry, prose, reminiscence and whimsy that will cause many people to have a Pavlova’s dog response: more meringue, please. In a short piece titled “No” she writes, “Ordering dessert cake from a menu is similar to buying a car without having spent a week on the Internet researching its power to weight ration …” In “The Lunchbox Review” the daughter of the late proprietor of this Hunter Street establishment describes her mother’s daily routine in feeding the city’s workers. It’s a delight.

JOURNEY TO TOBRUK
Louise Austin
Pier 9/Murdoch Books $34.95

John Murray looked like a young Errol Flynn and had a life almost as adventurous. He was a jackeroo and a soldier when both professions were hard and colourful. He survived the war to become a Queensland politician and to serve in the Menzies government on matters of defence and foreign affairs. Before his death in 2009 at the age of 93, Murray told his life story to his niece in a series of interviews. Austin (nee Oldham BA ’65 DipEd ’66) also had access to his articulate and affectionate letters home to his mother and she has used both sources to form the foundations of a rich portrait of a fine man and his long-gone Australia.