

Portrait of a family at work

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An encyclopedia that began as a scrapbook is now into its fourth edition, writes **Angela Bennie.**

IT ALL began with a scrapbook. In 1944 the art critic and author Alan McCulloch began collecting cuttings and notes on Australian art and artists, with the vague aim of one day collating the material into a reference work or dictionary of Australian art.

His experience and knowledge were wide: he had worked as an art critic on Melbourne newspapers, first on *The Argus* and later for more than 30 years on *The Herald*. His family home and working studio on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula were always overrun with visiting artists and writers and he maintained a wide correspondence with local and international figures in the arts.

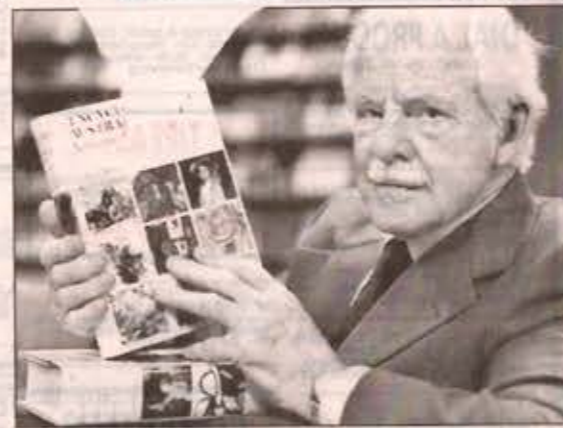
He would jot down notes from conversations and the hundreds of inquiries he received from the wider community about matters in Australian art, and he would store these in his scrapbook along with invitation cards to exhibitions and gallery openings, the odd biographical anecdote that came his way and anything he thought of historic significance or moment.

He had travelled widely in the United States, Europe and Britain, forging lifetime friendships and contacts. Today the State Library of Victoria holds the old scrapbook and a collection of thousands of his letters written over 60 years, witness to his standing and influence on an international and local level.

Who better, then, to compile the first encyclopedia of Australian art?

McCulloch began the task in 1955, drawing on the accumulated material and his vast experience, study and research. The project took him 13 years. McCulloch's *The Encyclopedia of Australian Art* finally made it into print in 1968. Such was its scholarship, research, critical comment, scope and idiosyncrasy, the two-volume reference soon became known as the bible of Australian art.

McCulloch died in 1992 but his



More McCulloch ... Emily and Susan joined forces on the fourth edition of the work first undertaken by Alan McCulloch, left. Main photo: Domino Postiglione

since then. Just take the interest and activity there is around Aboriginal art. It has simply exploded. There is a huge renewed

interest, too, in contemporary Australian art.

"So it wasn't a dynastic thing, or because we felt some obligation to a family destiny or anything like that. We just felt it was too much of a valuable property, too important a book, to let it lapse."

It might not seem like a dynastic exercise to the mother-and-daughter team, but the great tome's evolution through three generations has given it a special character and provenance, distinguishing it from other reference books of its kind for the tone and timbre of its entries.

It is still possible to detect the elder McCulloch's critical voice in many of them, as it is possible to hear the different generational emphases and interests in the entries by Susan and Emily.

"Emily's particular contribution is her knowledge of Aboriginal art

encyclopedia gathers strength. There have been two further editions and reappraisals since that first run of '68 - one in 1984; the other - a huge, single-volume doorstopper which was co-edited and co-authored by McCulloch and his daughter, Susan, the renowned art critic and writer - in 1994.

This month sees another reincarnation. It is again a doorstop of a work, with more than 8000 listings, 1500 new entries and 1000 illustrations, this time co-edited, written and published by Susan and her daughter, Emily McCulloch Childs.

"We had realised that the growth and changes in Australian art since the last edition were enormous, and we felt we had to record those changes," Susan says. "The art world had become hugely more diverse and dynamic

and of the new media and street art around today," says Susan, while her own strengths come from her long experience writing about Australian art - especially contemporary and Aboriginal art - as an author and as a journalist and critic for most of Australia's leading journals and newspapers over nearly 30 years.

Both writers agree the most important new section in this

major institutions like galleries, they are included but within their own space or in a gallery of their own. So it is in the book."

Emily arrived at the decision from a more political orientation. "Aboriginal people have fought very hard to maintain their identity," she says. "To have an Aboriginal identity was hard to hold on to because of the process of assimilation that was

continuing fascination with portraiture.

"We have a big section on portraiture in its own right, which we didn't have before," says Susan. "When you think about it, the Archibald is still thriving, in the last 10 years we have seen the establishment of the national portrait gallery, and photographic portraiture is huge. We trace portraiture all the way from George Lambert to Bill Henson."

Only one painting earns an entry on its own: Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*.

"It is the most influential painting in modern Australian art [collections]," says Susan. "It raises an awareness of art. It is what a lot of art is all about, where things are not quite comfortable or sure. It is the most studied art work in Australia, particularly the structure of it and what it means in all sorts of terms. It was a very brave purchase."

The New McCulloch's Encyclopedia of Australian Art is published by Aus Art Editions in association with Miegnyah Press.

It was ... too important a book, to let it lapse. SUSAN MCCULLOCH

edition is the long entry on Aboriginal art and artists.

"We decided to give Aboriginal art its own section after much thought," Susan says. "This was not meant to segregate it, but we felt it would be more useful as a reference work that way. One day it will merge, I believe, but it should not be merged now ... we are reflecting how things are, where Aboriginal art is. In all our

taking place in Australia. Their art was a way for them to heal that process. This art has its own demands, traditions, history - so that is why we decided to give it a separate section, to be a major focus of the book."

The new edition also reflects a strong and surprising resurgence of interest in painting and drawing, the emergence of street art, and Australia's