The Oily Ratbag and the Recycled Waratah:
Early Years of ABR

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This is Issue No. 250, and the twenty-fifth consecutive year, of Australian Book Review. Issue No. 1 appeared in 1978, edited by John McLaren and published by the National Book Council. Since then the journal has survived and thrived, through changes of editor (though not very often) and of editorial policy (though not very much); through changes of appearance, ownership, sponsorship and affiliation.

However, that ‘250’ effaces a whole earlier chapter in the history of ABR. When Issue No. 1 appeared in June 1978, the magazine was not being started: it was being revived. The original incarnation was published out of Adelaide for twelve years, edited in the first instance by Max Harris, Geoffrey Dutton and Rosemary Wighton. Dutton dropped out along the way, but Harris and Wighton continued to edit the journal until its final issue at the end of 1973. The first issue of the original Australian Book Review — Vol. 1, No. 1 — was published in November 1961.

The year 1961 had been eventful. John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as US President, and the Russians launched first Sputnik and then Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space. The Berlin Wall went up; Iraq began its attempts to annex Kuwait, and British troops were sent to the Middle East to defend it. Catch-22 was published, and the Wilson brothers formed the Beach Boys. Borges and Beckett shared the International Publishers’ Prize, the Prix Formentor; Adolf Eichmann was tried in Jerusalem for war crimes and sentenced to death by hanging. Jung died peacefully of natural causes and Hemingway violently by his own hand, as might, in each case, have been predicted; Lady Diana Spencer was born, Rudolf Nureyev defected to the West, and Patrick White’s forty-ninth birthday coincided with the founding of Amnesty International.

And in November, the month that the first issue of ABR was published, there were (at least) two significant developments in international politics: the UN overrode US protests and adopted bans on nuclear arms; and the Russians pleased the Iraqis by vetoing a UN seat for Kuwait. Given these eerily familiar-sounding facts, it comes as less of a surprise than it otherwise might to see that the first-ever issue of ABR wasn’t as different from the current one as the gap of over forty-one years might lead one to expect. So, to celebrate the 250th issue, here is a quick look back at the very first one, and at ABR’s first year.

The inaugural editorial spells out the journal’s aims, and gives a picture of the national literary infrastructure. ‘There is no way of finding out what is going on,’ it says.

Books are written, and are published with notable enthusiasm and courage, but the public do not get to hear about them. The reviewing of Australian books is a slapdash, chaotic, and neglected business … No more than 10% of Australian books manage to achieve press reviews … Book buyers and libraries have no way of discovering what new books are available … The future of Australian writing and publishing will partly
depend upon a wider and more thorough critical discussion of Australian books.

ABR, said the editorial, would provide that discussion and fill that gap. And so it did; it seems to have become almost immediately the source on which schools and libraries relied for information and advice about acquisitions — so much so that, within a year, and despite the journal’s original nationalist project, the editors had added a regular feature giving a detailed summary of that month’s new English books, with a short list of recommended acquisitions. The first editorial also, in an entrepreneurial move that was clearly Harris’s, makes an appeal to potential sources of advertising revenue: ‘It only remains to see whether publishers themselves will respond to this new concept in periodical publication. They have everything to gain and nothing to lose in giving practical support to this venture.’

The most immediately striking thing about ABR’s first year is that the names of its contributors — reviewers, columnists and the editors themselves — are consistently more recognisable, forty years later, than those of the authors they review. (There are, of course, some exceptions to this: the leading article of the first issue is Geoffrey Dutton’s long and detailed review of Riders in the Chariot, newly published by Eyre and Spottiswoode in a handsome hardback for sale at twenty-six shillings.) Reviewers over the first twelve months included Geoffrey Blainey, Robin Boyd, Manning Clark, Rosemary Dobson, Elizabeth Harrower, Stephen Murray-Smith, Randolph Stow, Kylie Tennant, Ian Turner, Russel Ward and Judith Wright.

By 1962 the covers have become handsome and shiny, always with some direct reference to the contents, and this issue has on the cover some spooky Pugh magpies in an infernal, burnt-out landscape. Other notable covers include Alun Leach-Jones’s illustration for the Patrick White story ‘Willy-Wagtails by Moonlight’ (reviewed inside by Clem Semmler, along with two other White stories also recently published in periodicals) and a wonderfully uneasy-making portrait of Russell Drysdale by Sali Herman.

Another ABR tradition established early, and followed ever since, is that of lively-to-acrimonious exchanges on the Letters page, as here where the Communist novelist Judah Waten writes in to accuse ‘the oily ratbag author of The Vegetative Eye’ (he means Harris) of having written ‘an insulting [unsigned] McCarthyite review of my novel Time of Conflict’. Harris replies that he has never reviewed, or indeed read, this or any other novel of Waten’s and that ‘if the letter above faithfully represents the subtlety of his literary style, it is an experience I propose to postpone indefinitely’.

But the main thing that has remained unchanged over those four decades is ABR’s commitment to analysis, information and debate about Australian writing and publishing. In 1978 John McLaren saw the value in what Harris, Wighton and Dutton had done, and determinedly resurrected it; those of us who succeeded him have done our best, in our different ways, to keep the venture going. And, as a former Editor, I look at that neat and chubby number, 250, with a pleasure whose complications would be difficult to unravel, and even more difficult to forget.