Will Dyson: Australia’s Radical Genius
By Ross McMullin
Carlton North: Scribe Publications, 2006, xiv + 414 pp. AUD $59.95

‘Everybody wants to be Cary Grant. I want to be Cary Grant.’ Said Cary Grant. One wonders if he might have amended his opinion and wanted to be Will Dyson, had he read Ross McMullin’s recent biography on the Australian cartoonist and war artist. There is much to envy about Dyson, not least his talent, and the reader will only add their name to a long list of admirers that includes such luminaries as George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle. Indeed, as McMullin presents him, Dyson seems enviable in almost every respect. Even the timing of his birth, which McMullin stresses a couple of times in this book, seems charmed: “born between Ned Kelly’s last stand and his execution” (p 407) and to a father who McMullin hints rather strenuously, much like an actor trying to yell *in sotto*, might have taken a part in the Eureka Stockade (p 407). Later, Dyson would become one of Australia’s official World War One artists which pretty much covers the Holy Trinity of Australia’s history: Ned, Eureka and the Diggers. That he would also lampoon the bodyline series, thus putting him close to Bradman, only increases his historical enviability. Of course it is not merely for the accidents of history or for his participation in great events that one might admire or envy Will Dyson. He was a gifted artist in many media as well as a gifted and perceptive satirist. He also possessed an easy manner that made it hard for even the most maligned subjects of his caricatures to display anything other than tolerance: as one victim – the then Premier of Victoria Tommy Bent – demonstrated when he told Dyson “when a man’s been bombarded with brickbats…, he doesn’t mind being tickled with a feather, even if it has a little ink on it” (p 35).

Dyson’s talent and amiability found him in the company of other like-minded and similarly talented individuals who together constituted Melbourne’s bohemian artistic elite. This included Randolph Bedford who celebrated his entry into political life by walking up to an official at Parliament House and asking him loudly “for directions to the Bribery Department” (p. 21). By far the most famous of his associations, and by far the most important for Dyson, was that with the Lindsay family. His friendship with Norman Lindsay would suffer from the latter’s temperament, but it would also introduce Dyson to Norman’s

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beautiful and gifted sister, Ruby, who Dyson would eventually marry and tragically lose to influenza shortly after the First World War.

Dyson, despite - or even perhaps because - of his conspicuous talents, struggled for recognition in Australia. In order to pursue his ambitions, he was forced to travel to less insular climes and like many before and since, Dyson travelled to London. Here, with a class system more pronounced than that of home, Dyson’s socialism became more agitated and was expressed through his cartoons. Almost without exception, these cartoons detailed the class struggle as Dyson saw it, and usually represented the capital-holding classes as a rotund fellow whose stomach bulged through his coat-tails - a character known simply as ‘Fat’.2 In London Dyson received the acclaim that was denied to him at home and in the years 1910-14 his work was instrumental in establishing the Labour newspaper, the *Daily Herald*. His popularity was demonstrated by the successful publication of selection of his work in book form, and he achieved the Holy Grail for left-leaning artists and intellectuals, that of being lauded by both the intelligentsia and the working class. When the First World War broke out in 1914, Dyson began work on his next book, *Kultur Cartoons*, which sold well and was accompanied by an exhibition at London’s Leicester Galleries. According to the introduction to *Kultur Cartoons* by H.G. Wells (which is reproduced in part in McMullin’s book) the cartoons were a response to what Dyson perceived to be a ‘militant monarchy’ (p 140), but for all intents and purposes they were and remain works of anti-German propaganda. McMullin notes that while disconcerted at some aspects of some cartoons, “[m]any of the ardent, vociferous demagogues demanding that Germany be crushed” still “placed the artist on their ‘side’ in this war” (p 143).

It is in the examination of this willingness of Dyson to propagandise as well as Dyson’s later honorary commission as a Lieutenant in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) that McMullin’s otherwise unassailable book falls shy. There is little examination of how this Guild Socialist came to be so involved and *emotionally* involved in furthering the war aims of the capitalists and militarists that he pilloried and despised so ardently before the war. Australian socialism, fostered as it was in Dyson’s era by the *Bulletin* and exemplified by the shearer’s strike, had always possessed a strong Australian nationalism. Nevertheless it would have been worth examining how this nationalism, while it strained relations between Dyson and the *Daily

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2 It was with a measure of enjoyment that I watched the leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition in Australia grapple with this character at the book’s launch.
Herald which was leaning further, and further towards pacifism, enabled Dyson to work along side of and form good relations with Imperial polemicists like C.E.W. Bean and Keith Murdoch.

In articles for both the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age, McMullin, notes that while the majority of artists on the Western Front can be characterised through their depictions of large, colour- and action-filled battle scenes, military machinery and the like,

Dyson’s focus was on the men. He sketched Australians waiting, resting and sleeping. He captured them stumbling out of the line, drained and dazed. He drew weariness, endurance, perseverance and fatalism. This is true, but this should not be confused with a realistic portrayal of war. Dyson allowed his nationalism to colour his renditions of the soldiers on the Western Front too much to allow for that. One or two sympathetic renditions of German POWs aside, Dyson displayed an Australian chauvinism that contradicted his socialism by usurping the innate humanism that coloured his cartoons and replacing it in with nationalism.

Indeed there is much more of Delacroix’s romanticism inherent in Dyson’s war art than there is of the rugged, tragic and ardently humanistic (and infinitely more repellent) Desastres de la Guerra (1820) by Goya. Here Goya reveals war as essentially inhumane and pitiless, as an act that diminishes us all and which can allow no heroes, not even weary and fatalistic ones. Goya does not distinguish between one side or the other, and one is often not entirely sure if he is depicting French or Spanish suffering. This is because Goya is depicting human suffering and the nationality of the victim is immaterial.

Dyson chose his heroes and he chose his victims and in so doing he delivered a visual representation of Bean’s jingoistic glorification of the Australian War Experience to Australian conservatives and militarists which - much to the detriment of the Left - has since formed the basis of the ‘digger myth’ that has coloured so much of Australia’s national identity. That such a large part of this should have been provided by a staunch and, at times, radical socialist seems to be a fascinating apparent contradiction. It is a contradiction, however, that McMullin’s book does not really pick up, and to be fair he shows no ambition to do so either. Instead McMullin has written an enjoyable and absorbing account of the life

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4 Particularly Delacroix’s representations of Greek sufferings such as his 1824 Massacre at Chios.
of an enjoyable and absorbing Australian. A cursory search revealed two other books on Will Dyson, one the original form of McMullin’s book, the other a 21-page working paper by Carol Mills. It is a shame that so little has been written on Dyson and that his art has been deemed as secondary to his lifestyle and manner because, as Herbert Read wrote in his introduction to F.D. Klingender’s *Goya in the Democratic Tradition*: ‘an artist of genius, offers the sociologist evidence far more reliable than mountains of historical documents’.\(^5\)

One gets the feeling from Ross McMullin’s agreeable biography that Will Dyson’s art might offer some similar insights into the way that Australia’s war history was created and manipulated, but that this has yet to be properly investigated.

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