

SASHA GRISHIN

Books in the Canberra region: the golden years

O vanity of human powers, how briefly lasts the crowning green of glory, unless an age of darkness follows!

Dante, *Purgatorio*, canto xi

For a brief time from the late 1970s through to the mid 1990s Canberra could lay claim to being a major national centre for book arts and artists' books. Subsequently its prominence faded and it was soon eclipsed by other cities. This paper attempts to characterise the nature of this upsurge of activity in the nation's capital and the reasons for its subsequent decline.

Alec Bolton was born in Sydney in 1926. He was educated at Sydney Grammar School and then served in the Royal Australian Navy during World War II, returning to Sydney to graduate in Arts at Sydney University in 1950. He then worked in commercial publishing, primarily with Angus & Robertson and then briefly with Sydney Ure Smith and was the assistant editor for the ten-volume *Australian Encyclopaedia* (1958). While at Angus & Robertson he met and married Rosemary Dobson, who worked there as an editor and reader. They had three children: a daughter and two sons. In 1966 Bolton took up the post of editor of the London branch of Angus & Robertson and the family moved to England, where they stayed until 1971.

It was in London that the secret life of Alec Bolton as a closet printer began and he enrolled as an evening student at the London College of Printing, where he mastered the rudiments of hand composition and letterpress machining. It was here that he was infected with the idea of establishing a private press. Bolton and his family returned to Australia late in 1971 for him to take up

Petr Herel, *Invitation to the Voyage*, in *Twelve: Sketches, Objects and Reflections in Print*, by senior lecturers of the Australian National University, Canberra School of Art, 1996

64

*Urbain
1/2 H. (1)*

CLINIQUE DE NEUROLOGIE ET DE NEUROPSYCHOLOGIE
Professeur Pierre LHERMITTE

HOPITAL DE LA SALPÊTRIÈRE
45, BOULEVARD DE L'HÔPITAL - 75014 PARIS CEDEX 13
TEL. : 33.64.24

Paris, le 25 Mai 1978

Monsieur le Docteur Michel MACHUREAU

Mon Cher Confrère,

J'ai vu Monsieur Petro HEREL, âgé de 35 ans, qui présente des troubles de l'équilibre depuis un incident de ski remontant à environ deux mois. En dehors de ce trouble de l'équilibre, Monsieur H. se plaint de difficultés à s'exprimer en Français. L'examen neurologique n'est pas significatif en dehors d'une déviation de la marche qui se fait, tantôt à droite, tantôt à gauche. Le fond d'oeil est normal. Il est donc vraisemblable qu'il puisse s'agir de phénomènes fonctionnels ainsi que vous le pensez. Un traitement comportant des anxiolytiques et de la Di-Hydroergotamine pourrait donc l'améliorer. Je suis disposé à le revoir, toutefois, si un phénomène nouveau se produisait.

Je vous prie, Mon Cher Confrère, de croire à l'assurance de mes meilleurs sentiments.

P. Der Agopian
Docteur P. DER AGOPIAN - Attaché
Assistent du Service -

P.S. Les radiographies du crâne, des rochers avec incidence spéciale faites le 18 mai 1978 n'ont pas permis de montrer d'anomalie notable.

circulato

a position as the first director of publications at the National Library of Australia. The following year he established a small press in the family house in Deakin, in suburban Canberra, as a domestic weekend venture, which he thought could be called 'Month of Sundays Press'. Guided by his wife, literary and geographic associations prevailed, and it was called the Brindabella Press. The name stuck although, between 1985 and 1992, it appears as the *Officina Brindabella* on the colophon. Bolton left the National Library in 1987 to concentrate his energies on the press, which published or printed 31 works before his death in 1996.¹

Alec Bolton had a Chandler & Price treadle press that he used for mainly hand-set letterpress and for lino-blocks, wood engravings and relief etchings. The main profile of Brindabella Press was books of poetry, including a number by Rosemary Dobson, with one of the early gems, printed in 1984, being an anthology of the wonderful verse of John Shaw Neilson accompanied by Barbara Hanrahan's images. Bolton's two passions as a book artist were typesetting by hand and wood engraving. He commissioned wood engravings from a number of prominent Australian printmakers, including Rosalind Atkins, Mike Hudson, Victoria Clutterbuck, Barbara Hanrahan and Helen Ogilvie. It is interesting to see this catholic spread of artists whom he selected and who quickly became his friends. The books were hand-bound, some by Brian Hawke, Robin Tait, many by Helen Wadlington, and others by Ron Eadie and Peter Marsh, with editions ranging from about 200 and rarely exceeding 300 copies. Alec Bolton and Rosemary Dobson knew just about everyone in the Australian literary and art world and could bring together unusual collaborations, such as between Bob Brissenden and Robin Wallace-Crabbe on Brissenden's *Elegies* in 1974, Alec Hope and Arthur Boyd on *The Drifting Continent* in 1979, Kenneth Slessor with Mike Hudson on *The Sea Poems of Kenneth Slessor* in 1990, and Les Murray and Rosalind Atkins on *The Sleepout* in 1994.

He was a gentleman printer who managed to arrange these creative collaborations and produce quality handcrafted books made to a high standard. Looking back at the heritage of the Brindabella Press, it is one of high quality book art following the English model, but expressed with a strong Australian accent. It made a valuable contribution to both the Canberra handmade book scene and to the book world nationally.

Another letterpress that operated in Canberra in the mid and late 1970s, which also published poetry with line-block illustrations, was Open Door Press. It operated first from a suburban location in Campbell and later moved to a disused space at the Australian National University. Alan Gould,



THE SLEEPOUT

By LES MURRAY ✱ Wood engraving by ROSALIND ATKINS

Childhood sleeps in a verandah room
in an iron bed close to the wall
where the winter over the railing
swelled the blind on its timber boom

and splinters picked lint off warm linen
and the stars were out over the hill;
then one wall of the room was forest
and all things in there were to come.

Breathings climbed up on the verandah
when dark cattle rubbed at a corner
and sometimes dim towering rain stood
for forest, and the dry cave hunched woollen.

Inside the forest was lamplit
along tracks to a starry creek bed
and beyond lay the never-fenced country,
its full billabongs all surrounded

by animals and birds, in loud crustings,
and something kept leaping up amongst them.
And out there, to kindle whenever
dark found it, hung the daylight moon.

Rosalind Atkins

Two hundred copies hand-printed on Aches paper by Alec Bolton at the Brindabella Press, sixty-one Stonehaven Crescent, Deakin, A. C. T., February - March 1994. The poem is from Les Murray's book *The Daylight Moon* (1987), and grateful acknowledgment is made to Angus & Robertson for permission to reprint it. Copyright in this brochure Brindabella Press 1994.

This is copy number

189

Les Murray, *The Sleepout*, wood engraving by Rosalind Atkins, Canberra, Brindabella Press, 1994

Kevin Hart, David Brooks, Philip Mead and Judith Rodriguez were prominent in its operations. They published both handset single-sheet handbills containing a poem and an accompanying illustration, as well as stapled booklets including Gould's *The Skald Mosaic* with illustrations by Anne Kent in 1975, and Hart's *Nebuchadnezzar* with a cover illustration by Arthur Boyd in 1977.

Although Alec Bolton was a significant pioneer and, in 1972, was one of the earliest book artists to be working in Canberra at a professional level, by the late 1970s the cultural landscape of Canberra, especially in relation to printmaking and the book arts, changed significantly with the arrival of three continentally trained artist printmakers: Petr Herel from Czechoslovakia and France, and Jörg Schmeisser and Udo Sellbach, both from Germany. While Bolton ran essentially a high quality backyard operation on the weekends, until he retired in 1987 at the age of 61 when he turned to it full-time, these three artists established a professional practice within the newly re-established Canberra School of Art.² In April 1977 Sellbach took up his

appointment as the founding director of the Canberra School of Art and put into place a far-reaching visionary program that developed dramatically through until his resignation in 1985. With something of a Bauhaus-like model in mind, Sellbach set up a series of semi-autonomous workshops with porous boundaries, generally headed by younger artists who already boasted international reputations.

For the purposes of this paper, the most important workshop to be established was the Graphic Investigation Workshop, which Udo Sellbach first proposed in 1978 and which came into being with the appointment of Petr Herel in 1979. The important point to make was that by the late 1970s and early 1980s there appeared a critical mass of artists and artisans in Canberra interested in the book as a handmade art object. By 1982, when the Australian National Gallery³ opened its doors, Pat Gilmour was at the helm of the international print and illustrated book collection and Roger Butler was the curator of Australian prints and illustrated books. Both were exceptionally well informed and enthusiastic supporters of printmaking and of the handmade book and both had at their disposal staff and budgets which seemed fabled in later times. By January 1983 Studio One opened its doors as a professional editioning and open-access printmaking workshop.⁴ Nomenclature like 'a renaissance of the handmade book' carries too much baggage to be of use now, but what was important was that there appeared a sizeable group of likeminded people in Canberra committed to the handmade book and to the artists' book, while institutions, including the National Library of Australia, Australian National Gallery and the Australian National University, stood solidly behind them. This could be described as a process of cultural self-awareness, where people at the time had the perception that they were at the centre of a major development firmly located in Canberra.

The Graphic Investigation Workshop existed for 20 years, from 1979 until 1998, when Petr Herel retired. As stated in its syllabus, '[t]he four main and interrelated components in the workshop's curriculum were drawing, the printed image, papermaking and typography. Drawing was seen as central to the investigative process. This focus provided an ideal situation for the development of the Artist book in the workshop's practice.'⁵

There is little point in coming to blows over terminology and 'book arts', as employed in this paper, should cover just about everything from *livres d'artistes*, the handmade book, the artists' book through to the democratic multiples and zines. The Graphic Investigation Workshop also adopted this broad church state of mind and encouraged a wide-ranging inquiry into the graphic mark, which included the study of traditional typesetting with Peter

Night Fishing

— Jamie Grant

Jamie Grant

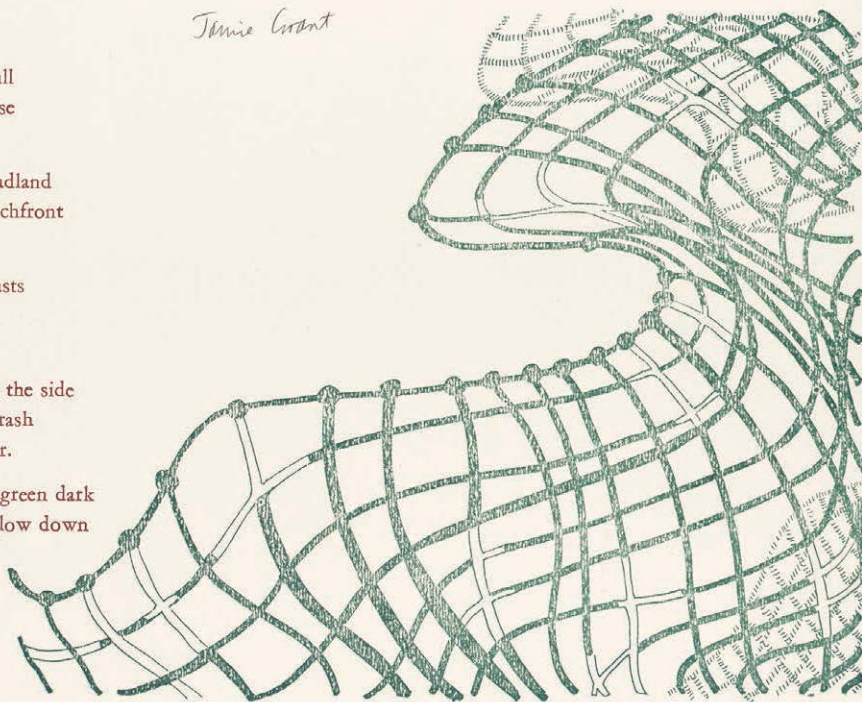
Far under the hull
The schools cruise
Perilous reefs.

Close by, the headland
Darkens, the beachfront
Lights leap out.

Punctured by masts
The sun deflates
Like a tyre.

Hauled live over the side
Dead flathead thrash
On the boat floor.

Light shoals the green dark
Strand. Planets glow down
Like fish eyes.



Jamie Grant, *Night Fishing*, illustrated by Wally Caruana, Canberra, Open Door Press, 1976

Finlay and papermaking with Gaynor Cardew and Katharine Nix. Staff of the workshop, with its technical assistants and advanced level students, included Leanne Crisp, Christopher Croft, Bernard Hardy, John Pratt, Frances Rhodes, Paul Uhlmann, Dianne Fogwell, Andrew Kaminski, Les Petersen, Gary Poulton, Lindsay Dunbar, Kaye Patterson, Jonathan Nix, John Brennand, Kirsten Wolf, Mark Van Veen, Phil Day, Kate Dorrrough, Paul McDermott, Danie Mellor and Liz Tupper. Recognition must also be given to the dozen or more other active participants whose names are preserved in the three volumes of catalogues that Petr Herel produced to document the 386 artists' books created in his workshop, some 245 of which entered the workshop's archive, which is lodged at the Menzies Library of the Australian National University.⁶ The workshop was a crucial training ground for future generations of book artists, some of whom set up private presses in Canberra, including Les Petersen who set up Raft Press Inc; Dianne Fogwell who established Criterion Press, plus a number of other subsequent presses; and Phil Day who, with Ingeborg Hansen, set up Finlay Press.

In 1980 Petr Herel co-established the Labyrinth Press with Thierry Bouchard in France, where collaborative books were produced between the two continents. After the printing of images in Canberra, the pages would be shipped to France for typography setting and printing on Bouchard's presses in Paris. A superb example is from 1986, John Donne's *Hymn to my God, my God, in my sicknesse* where aquatint appears to have been almost breathed onto the paper. Donne knows that he will die soon and likens his doctors to cosmographers and his own body to a map: 'Whilst my physicians by their love are grown, Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown That this is my south-west discovery, Per fretum febris, by these straits to die.' Per fretum febris – or – 'through the strait of fever' to die may be echoed in a stretched out map of the Western Australian interior over a tombstone shape suspended within a luminous sea of blue.

Zone, the first poem in *Alcools* (1913) is one of Guillaume Apollinaire's most famous texts – in part autobiographic, in part an erotic fantasy, in part a philosophic rant – it starts with the evocation 'You are now weary of this ancient world' and ends with a proclamation 'Farewell, Farewell, Sun slit throat'. Petr Herel's imagery is deliciously abstract, but in a tangible manner, with a key locked into a sealed envelope. Herel as an artist and as a teacher introduced a sensibility, as well as a bewildering wealth of experience in techniques and possibilities in book arts that he brought from continental Europe, and which had a profound impact on several generations of artists, particularly in Canberra and Melbourne. He was, however, a teacher who did not clone disciples, but cultivated fellow travellers and led by example.

Jörg Schmeisser, on the other hand, was a different sort of artist, who mastered a technique of multi-plate colour etching that he combined with a miniaturist precision of draughtsmanship. It is a beautiful and seductive technique that did in the first instance clone followers and one could name Deborah Perrow, Chris Denton, John Pratt and Basil Hall, all of whom initially made Schmeisser-inspired works before they could branch out and create their own authentic artistic language.

Jörg Schmeisser was not primarily a book artist, but he made a major contribution to Canberra's print culture and trained many of the artists who went on to become book artists. As head of the Printmaking Workshop the academic orientation had a more singular focus than the Graphic Investigation Workshop, but the boundaries between the workshops were porous and students frequently moved between the two.

One such student was Dianne Fogwell, who initially trained under Jörg Schmeisser and then went on to teach under Petr Herel. In October 1982



Petr Herel, *Zone* by Guillaume Apollinaire, Canberra, Labyrinth Press, 1988

a partnership was formed between Fogwell and another printmaker, Meg Buchanan, who had studied under SW Hayter at Atelier 17 in Paris and then under Hayter's disciple Krishna Reddy in New York. Returning to Australia with her Canberra-based husband, Buchanan was in need of printmaking facilities and a press, while Fogwell, who had graduated under Schmeisser and had worked as a studio assistant for a couple of years, was also in need of a studio. Jointly they founded Studio One, which would absorb art school graduates and other printmakers in Canberra who needed an open access printmaking workshop; it provided the founders with a workshop for their own practice, and it also served as an editioning studio for established artists who wanted their work printed. One of the most important, if rarely stated, achievements of Studio One was the training of a number of accomplished master printers, including the two founders, Fogwell and Buchanan, and Basil Hall.

The printmaking and book culture in Canberra in the 1980s was such that it appeared natural for the artists at Studio One to go into book production and Dianne Fogwell, Meg Buchanan, Christopher Croft, GW Bot, Julian Davies, Tanya Myshkin, Victoria Clutterbuck, Bernard Hardy and Robin

Wallace-Crabbe all made books. At the end of 1985, Studio One became an incorporated association and the partnership between Fogwell and Buchanan ended. Studio One continued until 2000 when it was merged with Megalo, a screenprint collective that was established in Canberra in 1980 and had more success in attracting government funding. The two founders of Studio One went their different ways and, in 1984, Buchanan established an editioning press, Buchanan Press, at Hall just outside of Canberra.

Shortly after establishing her own press, Meg Buchanan observed:

the so called democracy and marketability of an edition of one image has never held much romance for me. Since the establishment of my own press, I have been able to indulge my own preference in this regard and concentrate on the exploration of monoprinting processes as well as work with fellow artists interested in using printmaking processes to extend their use of line, mark tone, surface quality, and thus fully utilise the authority of the language of printmaking.⁷

Dianne Fogwell established her Criterion Press in Braidwood in 1986 which then expanded to also include a dedicated print gallery with early exhibitions of work by Jörg Schmeisser and Petr Herel.

Editions Tremblay was established in 1984 by the US-trained lithographer Theo Tremblay who, in 1981, had been invited to Canberra by Udo Sellbach and Jörg Schmeisser to set up lithography at the Canberra School of Art. Tremblay was instrumental in inviting Indigenous artists to Canberra, where he introduced them to printmaking and, by 1989, he was travelling to remote Aboriginal communities where he collaborated with artists. Subsequently Tremblay travelled and settled in Cairns, while Basil Hall settled in Darwin, and both have been key master printers involved in the Indigenous printmaking movement. Print culture in Canberra became contagious: Colin Little and Alison Alder, the former from Earthworks Poster Collective in Sydney, the latter a student from the Canberra School of Art, set up Megalo International Screenprinting Collective, while Mandy Martin established Acme Ink screenprinting workshop also in Canberra.

Within a generation, artists associated with Studio One went on to establish private presses in Canberra. These included Basil Hall, Gaye Patterson, Robin Wallace-Crabbe, John Pratt, GW Bot, Gillian Mann, Ben Taylor, Kevin Gilbert, Jörg Schmeisser, Carol Ambrus, Claire Young and Deborah Metz.

By the early 1990s some of the heat dissipated from the book making and printmaking scene in Canberra. It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons

for this. Some of the artists had moved on, died or retired and, as the population of Canberra grew to over a quarter of a million, the fabric and structure of art culture started to change. Public funding was directed to what was termed the 'arts industry', the Canberra School of Art amalgamated with the School of Music to form the Canberra Institute of the Arts and, in 1992, it amalgamated again, this time with the Australian National University. The Australian National Gallery changed its name to the National Gallery of Australia and faced internal restructuring problems. Key players, including Udo Sellbach, James Mollison and Pat Gilmour were no longer in Canberra. Certainly, great exhibitions continued to happen, including a survey exhibition of Petr Herel's artists' books held at the National Library of Australia in 1989, but there was a perception that the centre could no longer hold and more interesting developments in book arts were happening elsewhere in Australia, possibly in Melbourne. In a sense it is an argument of cultural exhaustion, where a cultural phenomenon often has a specific lifespan with a culmination and a progressive decline as some of the excitement starts to fade.

The argument advanced in this paper is that Canberra in the 1970s experienced a huge explosion of interest in the handmade book that reached a certain culmination in the 1980s and commenced a decline in the 1990s. Like all sweeping generalisations, this one is in need of many caveats and exceptions. Objectively, we can point to shrinking financial resources, institutionalisation, bureaucratisation and growing personality frictions. Great handmade books continued to be made; take, for example, Udo Sellbach's magnificent artist book *And Still I See It*, made while he was a visiting fellow at the School of Art in Canberra in 1995 and inspired by a verse from Dante and his own childhood memories of World War II. In retrospect, however, the age of the grand gesture and of the bold idea was increasingly stifled by the institutional 'eco rats'.⁸ Dedicated print galleries became increasingly less active and other more mainstream Canberra commercial art galleries, including Gallery Huntly, aGOG, Criterion, Ben Grady, Abraxas, Bolitho, Giles Street Gallery and Spiral Arm Gallery, ceased to exist. Studio One, which was once such a hub of activity, faded from prominence until it was forced to close its doors in 2000.