

THE BIG DRAW:

FOR A COUNTRY WITH A RELATIVELY YOUNG PUBLISHING INDUSTRY, AUSTRALIA HAS A BEGUILINGLY RICH HISTORY OF COMIC ART. EARLIER THIS YEAR THIS HISTORY WAS CELEBRATED WITH AN EXHIBITION AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA (NLA) IN CANBERRA, FEATURING COMICS FROM THE INSTITUTION'S OWN SUBSTANTIAL COLLECTION, WRITES **JANE CLOTHIER**.

A brief history of the Australian comic

Although the first Australian comic, *Vumps*, was published in 1908, it would be decades before the local industry really started to grow. For the next 30 years comic strips were largely restricted to sections within entertainment magazines, such as *The Comic Australian*, *The Golden Age* and the renowned *Smith's Weekly*. Despite this, the seeds were already being sown for some of the century's biggest comic characters. In the early 1920s, *Smith's Weekly* published the *You & Me* strip, which would later evolve into *The Potts*, while the *Sunday Sun* ran *Us Fellas*, which introduced Ginger Meggs to its readers.

At this point, Australian children's comics were still mixed with articles and text in magazines such as *The Boy's Weekly* and *Pals*, meaning that British comic papers dominated the bookshelves. Then, in 1931, the first true comic book to be published in Australia appeared. Named *The Kookaburra*, it brought with it characters who appeared in every issue, such as Bloodthirsty Ben and Callous Claude, and Perky Pete the Prospector. Three years later it was joined by *Fatty Finn's Weekly*, featuring the ubiquitous Fatty Finn in every issue.

Throughout the 1930s, reprints of US comic strips started to flood Australian stores. These featured strips that had originally appeared in women's magazines, including Buck Rogers and Felix the Cat from *The New Idea* magazine. The presence of these cheaply produced imports caused some disquiet amongst Australian publishers, who understandably felt their infant industry was under threat.

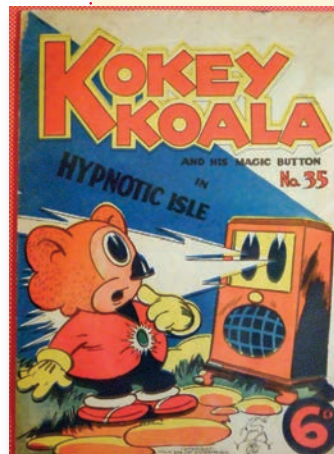
It was not until the early 1940s that a 'golden age' of home grown comics dawned. Due to the outbreak of the Second World War, the Australian government imposed embargoes on imported American and British publications. This left a fertile ground for a generation of home grown comic artists and writers who were only too happy to produce material for publication in the wide open comic market.

Import restrictions continued beyond the end of the war, enabling the industry a period of unfettered growth. By the end of 1948, Atlas Publications' *Captain Atom* was selling over one million copies annually, while Frew Publications had just launched *The Phantom*, which went on to become Australia's longest continuously published comic book.

In the 1950s rising production costs again threatened Australian comics, while, incredible as it seems today, censors started to clamp down on content. When the import embargo was lifted in 1959, imported American titles such as those from the Marvel Comics stable started to dominate, triggering the decline of some Australian comic books. The Australian industry suffered more than a decade of stagnation, until the radical artists of 1970s counter-culture revitalised comic content, and the 1980s' birth of the graphic novel stimulated fresh comic artistry and independent publishing.

Kokey Koala, a super marsupial

As the golden age of Australian comics began, an artist called Noel Cook (1896-1981) was busy drawing. Born in New Zealand, Cooke had fought for his home country in the First World War before migrating to Australia in the 1920s. He at first worked in the style of the day, with the text below the images rather than integrated within the drawing, but this later changed. His early work is notable for its inventiveness and effective layouts, which suited science fiction stories that included Peter and all the Roving Folk in the Australian Sunday Times.



However, it was not for science fiction that Noel Cook was best known, but rather his amusing animal stories and in particular his children's title, *Kokey Koala and his Magic Button*. This was published by Sydney's Offset Printing from 1947 to 1955. It is hard to imagine a much more Australian superhero than a koala with a shirt button that bestows the wearer with a range of advanced powers when pressed. Kokey was hugely popular, with thousands of Australian children following his adventures as he gained powers such as speed, strength and the ability

to fly, meaning he could solve problems and help many boys and girls. The comic was characterised by simple story lines and bad jokes.

A salty outback character

Another artist who had migrated to Australia, albeit at the age of four, was English born Eric Jolliffe (1907-2001). The youngest boy in a family of 12 children, he left school at 15 and spent several years working on farms in New South Wales and Queensland. He all but stumbled into an art career after picking up a book on drawing in a local bookshop. After an unpromising stint on a technical college art course, he worked in unrelated jobs before serving with the RAAF in the Second World War. Upon his return, he slowly settled into a freelance career, selling his cartoon strips.



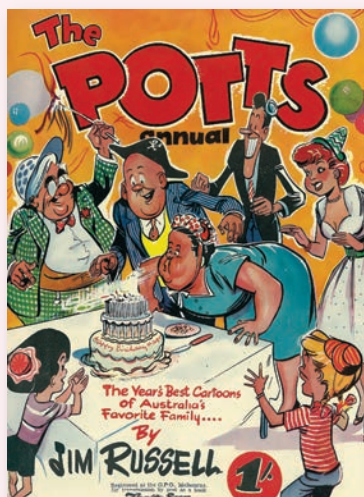
He quickly established himself as an illustrator of rural life in the outback. In *Saltbush Bill*, which was published in Associated Newspapers' *Pix* magazine from 1944 to 1970, he blended observations of farming life with a gritty and characteristically Australian humour. Jolliffe published a remarkable 130 books during his career, including not only *Saltbush Bill*, but *Witchetty's Tribe* and his self-titled *Jolliffe's Outback*.

COLLECTABLE AUSTRALIAN COMICS

From Virgil Girls to Captain Flash

Virgil Gavan Reilly (1892-1974) is best known as a newspaper cartoonist, but he also had a highly successful second career as a comic book artist. He honed his skills drawing propaganda imagery and recruitment posters during the First World War, before moving on to adverts for movies and book illustrations. During the 1920s and 1930s, *Smith's Weekly* carried his cartoons featuring a woman who became known as the 'Virgil Girl'. Suffice to say that she was somewhat sassy and barely in control of her flimsy clothing.

Reilly was lower profile when it came to his comic books, with the best known being *Silver Flash and His Frog-Men*, published by Sydney's Invincible Press from 1950 to 1955. Captain Silver Flash and his crew ran a marine patrol in their submarine, encountering all manner of strange creatures and villains intent on taking over the world. The Captain fought such adversaries as an army of weedmen and their queen, giant swordfish, and a lord who turns into a dwarf – and that's just in one issue. So successful was this series that it ran to an impressive 54 issues, making Reilly a much sought after comic artist. His other comic works included the first six issues of *The Invisible Avenger*, featuring a mad Chinese scientist, and *Fighting Fleet Comics* for the Red Circle Press. Naval themes were evident throughout much of his comic book work, while all books displayed his characteristic graceful brushwork and minimal backgrounds.



1940s-2001 Pottering around

In 1939, the Australian comic artist Jim Russell (1909-2001) took over an existing comic strip called *You & Me*, which featured an Australian couple. Little did he know it was destined to become a soaring success over many decades and that because of it he would become an entry in the *Guinness Book of Records*.

After leaving school at fifteen, Russell had drifted through various jobs, including political cartoonist for the *Sydney Evening News* and writer for *Referee* magazine. He then wrote sports pieces for *Smith's Weekly*. By 1938 he was also drawing a comic strip for the magazine, based on the radio serial, *Inspector Scott of Scotland Yard*.

You & Me had originally been created for *Smith's Weekly* in 1920 by artist Stan Cross. When Cross left, Russell took over as writer and artist. He renamed the comic *Mr and Mrs Potts*, introduced the Potts' children and grandchildren, and started to depict the everyday humour of Australian family life. Mr and Mrs Potts soon became renowned for their drinking, arguing and swearing. When *Smith's Weekly* closed in 1950, the Herald Weekly Times Group in Melbourne bought the rights, and Russell finally created

The Potts as a daily comic strip. Forced to clean up the leading characters' behaviour, Russell sneaked in the infamous Uncle Dick, repository of all the editor-unfriendly traits.

Such was the popularity of the strip with readers that an annual was published from 1952 to 1960. In the 1960s, *The Potts* was syndicated to 40 newspapers in the USA. In 1966 Russell was the first Australian inaugurated to the US National Cartoonists' Society, and in 1976 he was awarded an MBE. He still holds the world record for continuously drawing a comic strip, single-handedly.



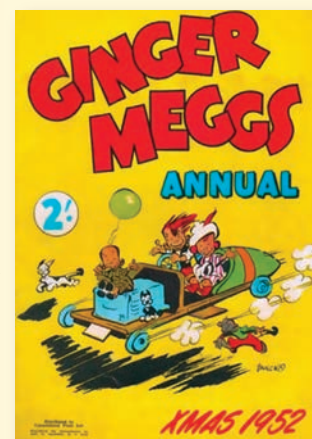
The unstoppable rise of Ginger Meggs

Us Fellas by Jimmy Bancks was the longest-running comic strip in Australia. Launched on 13 November 1921 in the *Sunbeams* page of the *Sunday Sun*, it featured the instantly recognisable character of Ginger Meggs. This was so popular that in 1924, the first *Sunbeams (Ginger Meggs) Annual* was published, starting a Christmas tradition that lasted for the next 35 years.

Ginger Meggs was a red-haired rascal who lived in an inner suburban working-class household. The character was based on Bancks' best friend, Charlie Somerville, who lived in the Sydney suburb of Hornsby and went on to become a businessman and councillor.

Bancks, who had left school, was responsible for writing, drawing and syndicating the character until his death from a heart attack in 1952. He left a year's worth of Ginger Meggs strips to be published, after which the strip was taken up by four subsequent artists. Their work has enabled Ginger Meggs to live on to the present day, appearing in over 120 newspapers in 34 countries.

Ginger has been the subject of a movie and a musical, has featured on an Australian stamp and a coin, and currently has his own website: www.gingermeggs.com



THE BIG DRAW: COLLECTABLE AUSTRALIAN COMICS CONT.



A world famous marsupial

A certain kangaroo is known by millions, but fewer people know that Skippy was briefly a character in a comic book. Australian artist Keith Chatto (1924-1992), one of the most prolific comic artists of the post-war period, was responsible for the comic book published by Junior Readers Press.

Chatto's career was nothing if not varied. An RAAF draughtsman during the war, he later illustrated air training material. In 1947 he became staff artist for a nudist magazine, *The Australian Sunbather*, from Ashworth Publications. In the late '40s he created a string of popular characters: The Buccaneer, The Glamour Girl, and Buck Davey Rides Again, about the Jack Davey radio

character. In 1949-1950, he created *The Lone Wolf* for Atlas Publications: a western character with an entire comic book, which continued to appear for several years.

Turning to freelance film production, Chatto continued to illustrate record sleeves and pulp fiction covers. In the late 1960s he was commissioned to illustrate the *Skippy* comics, based on the popular TV series that told the story of a young boy and a wild female eastern grey kangaroo.



Making her mark in a man's world: Moira Bertram

It was always going to take a special female artist to shine in the male dominated comic industry, but Australian Moira Bertram (b.1929) was just that. She had her first comic strip, *Jo and her Magic Cloak*, published in the *Daily Mirror* at the age of 14. This featured a dancer who, complete with magic cloak, assists her American fighter pilot boyfriend in outwitting gangsters and the Japanese enemy.

In her early career, Moira drew soldiers, army planes and landing craft for the war comic *Mission: Front Line!* Her illustrations are remarkable for strong perspectives that convey the drama of crashing vehicles, rockets, tanks, spacecraft and all manner of exciting events. The books she illustrated for KG Murray's Climax Color Comic series have titles that give a hint of her high action imagery: *Pirate's Gold*, *The Runaway Rocket*, *Who Stole the Maharajah's Crown?* and *Captain Buck: Adventure in Siberia*.

In 1949, Moira and her sister Kathleen self-published the *Red Finnegan* series, an action adventure series set in Japan, featuring the detective of the title. These comics were black and white, with strong lines and patterns, and striking silhouettes.

She ceased working as a comic artist in the 1950s. Despite a prolific output, and a style that anticipated that of US comics in the 1960s, her name today remains relatively unknown.



Collecting Australian comics

The collectability of comic books and strips is firmly established, with buyers motivated by an appreciation of the art form, nostalgia, or a love of comic genres, such as sci-fi, horror or fantasy.

Comics come in various formats. Foremost is the magazine, but comics also appeared as sections within entertainment magazines and as strips in newspapers. The hard-backed annual publications were produced for the most popular strips.

Comic book price guides are available online (e.g. www.comicspriceguide.com), providing estimates of values in accordance with demand, availability and item condition. It's best to become familiar with the condition grading scale, reprinted on eBay, which ranges from Poor (PR) 0.5/10 to Mint (MT) 9.9-10/10. Details of creators, characters and storylines are also provided. The marketplace itself is now highly visible online, with online sales and auction sites adding to increased price transparency.

Quality remains an issue. The low cost of production has encouraged a new wave of independent publishers, some of whom are attracted to trends with a view to cashing in. That said, few comics of the 1990s have retained their

value, particularly as large quantities were produced, and the high prices achieved previously are now only seen for the very rare comics, making buyers more cautious.

A lot of selling takes place online, although many major cities have dedicated comic stores. The safe investments will always be the leading titles and artists of the golden era, with condition and scarcity being major factors.

<http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/publishing-and-writing/the-australian-comic-book-renaissance-192933>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-15/rare-australian-comics-on-display-national-library-kokey-koala/6018450>

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