



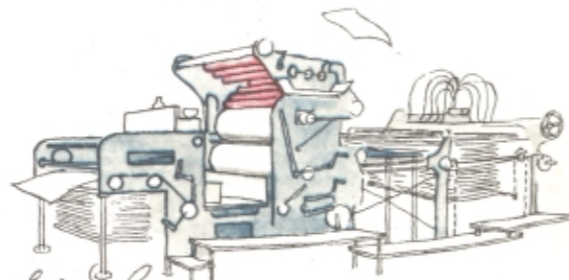
THE AUSTRALIA BOOK



Written by Eve Pownall



Illustrated by Margaret Senior



Printed & published by the House of John Sands



The recent exhibition *Natura Morta: the Scientific Illustrations of EH Zeck & Margaret Senior* attracted a number of visitors, drawn by their memories of the artists' work and a wish to see their original illustrations

Amongst these visitors was Philippa Barbour, an avid family historian with a personal connection to one of the artists. Her mother, Eve Pownall, was a prize-winning author of children's stories and Margaret Senior illustrated two of her books.

Philippa Barbour was touched to see that one of the *Natura Morta* exhibition labels mentioned that Margaret Senior was the illustrator of *The Australia Book* by Eve Pownall.

The publication won the 1952 Book of the Year Award, and was described as 'one of the most beautiful and original books ever published for children in Australia'. We were keen to hear more about these two talented women: a writer and an artist collaborating in the 1950s — a time when, it is popularly perceived, women were mothers and wives only.

The title page of *The Australia Book* includes a series of illustrations by Margaret Senior of those involved in its publication. Alongside the author's name appears an image of Eve Pownall poised at her desk with the pages of her book flying out of the typewriter. At her feet, reading the pages, are two children: the young Philippa Pownall (now Barbour) and her little brother Gerald. Next is Margaret Senior's image of herself, working on the book's illustrations at her drawing board. Then the pages are shown speeding through the John Sands presses, leading to a final image of a printer labouring under a tall stack of bound books.

Is this what it was like to be Eve Pownall's young daughter, surrounded by a flurry of creative activity? 'I certainly remember the sound of the typewriter all my life', replies Barbour. 'Early morning and late at night. When I was a teenager, I used to roll my eyes when Mum used to tell me about her research. I'd think, oh no, not at half past seven in the morning!' she laughs, again rolling her eyes. 'But, now I'd love to be able to sit down with Mum and have one last cup of tea', she reflects, with a slight catch of emotion seeming to come from pride in her mother's achievements combined with a sense of loss that, as a child, all this activity was just an ambient part of life that she wishes she had more consciously observed. Now she realises how much there was still to discuss.

Barbour recalls that, at first, her mother 'used to write, with great frustration, at the dining table. She had a typewriter and filing cabinets which seemed to grow. Then she moved from the dining table onto card tables', scattered around their Longueville home on Sydney's North Shore, where the family lived for 40 years. Barbour's father, Leslie Pownall, was 'a very good handyman and he eventually built a return desk out of maple for my mother to write at'.

Eve Pownall's interest in writing for children was piqued by having her own family. She was always writing stories in exercise books as a young woman, but reading to young Philippa and Gerald sparked a special interest in books available for young readers. She became involved in the establishment of the Children's Book Council in 1945 and, with her husband, was drawn to new philosophies of education emerging from America involving the discovery learning approach. In the late 1940s, she began writing radio scripts for 'women's sessions' on the ABC, aimed at 'women who might be pottering around at home and listening'. A publisher encouraged her to write a script, which eventually went on to become *The Australia Book*. It took almost ten years for the story finally to be published in book form.

Barbour speculates that her mother must have met Margaret Senior through the publishers John Sands. She does recall Senior visiting the house: 'They would discuss how a character was going to be represented. I remember vivid political discussions; they were both fairly left-wing. And I remember very clearly when they were getting onto the layout stage, cutting and pasting. They only worked together on two books, but they kept in contact by phone and were always interested in what each other was doing.' Senior always showed an interest in Pownall's children. 'She certainly sympathised with Mum about all the things I was doing as a teenager', recalls Barbour, with a sheepish grin at the memory.

Eve Pownall's approach to history has been documented in a talk she gave to a seminar on writing and illustrating for children in 1977: 'They used to have an old saying when I was young, "Geography is maps, history is chaps". It's the chaps I go looking for, and the chap's wives and the kids. What I want to know, when the

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colony changed from a prison into a colony, is, what were the kids playing, what were they doing? How were their mothers coping out in the frontiers? How did they cope during the bank smashes in the 1880s, during the grey days of the depression? What were they drinking and eating and wearing and thinking?"

As writer Lynn Fletcher observed in the journal of the Lu Rees Archives: 'Answers to these questions were not available in published form. Eve delved into unpublished material held in the Mitchell Library, read reminiscences of women who had long resided in country areas and had documented day-to-day life around them. She recognised the wealth of information held by State historical societies and country archives and she corresponded with Country Women's Associations across Australia for the information she sought.'

Philippa recalls her mother's intensive research process: 'I remember going to the Mitchell Library with Mum. She went three days a week from late 1942 until she died in 1982. She was very proud when she got her readers ticket.' Some of Eve's passion and commitment must have rubbed off on Philippa, despite her teenage resistance, because, now, she is dedicating at least two days a week of her own retirement to research into the family's history. She has been coming to State Records for four years, searching through the convict, bankruptcy, public service and deceased estates records. And she's even found a relative who operated a ships chandlery business in The Rocks, directly opposite where the archives now stand in Globe Street.

Like her mother might have, Philippa has been concentrating on her female ancestors, because 'They have been airbrushed from official histories. It's not deliberate, they're just not thought to be important'. So she has been tracking the life stories of 13 women — nine from her mother's family and four from her father's. She believes Eve would 'be absolutely fascinated' by her findings. 'And she would have been delighted to have two convicts in the family.'

There's Amelia Trigg, wife of Henry Trigg, who arrived in Western Australia in 1829 on the fifth ship to enter the Swan River. And Margaret Frederick, wife of John Stoneman, who claimed his inheritance evaporated in a scheme to synchronise all the clocks in Sydney. But, actually, he met a con-man who persuaded him to invest in a nickel mine in New Caledonia, and was declared bankrupt in 1901. And Ellen Beuzeville Pownall, 'who did teacher training and got one of the earliest teaching certificates after her rat of a husband disappeared leaving her with three sons and seven step children. She was definitely a woman of independence and some worth.'

Barbour is exhilarated by her research work: 'it's like meeting people stepping forward from the shadows. It's amazing.' She doesn't plan to publish her research, but just wants to give her four young grandchildren a 'potted history of the women in their family. To keep alive what happened in previous generations. 'And to be able to give them a full and interesting answer when they ask 'Nanna, what do you remember about ...?'

Susan Charlton

'Australia's past, its flavours and its stories'

Lots of adults remember poring over the pages of Eve Pownall's stories and Margaret Senior's drawings. Bob Carr is one of them. He dedicated the opening paragraphs of his book *What Australia Means to Me* to the impact of *The Australia Book* on his personal sense of history

'Not long ago, in a drawer at home, I came across one of my first books. It was called *The Australia Book*, it was published in the early 1950s and the author was Eve Pownall. On the inside cover under the words 'This book belongs to ...' I had proudly pencilled 'Robert Carr'. It was the lettering of a six-or-seven-year-old staking ownership of his first history book.

The binding is loose now, the paper torn. But I soon found myself looking again, with the curiosity of a boy, at the familiar pages, the simple unpatronising text, the charming old-fashioned drawings of Aborigines, convicts, bushrangers, diggers. Familiarity came flooding back.

... If patriotism springs first from knowledge of our country's history and geography, I have Eve Pownall and her book to thank for getting me started. It awakened my curiosity about Australia's past, its flavours and its stories.'

Bob Carr, Premier of NSW, 1995–2005

What Australia Means to Me, Penguin Books