

Vane Lindesay

Alan McCulloch: cartoonist of distinction

OF THE MANY skilled cartoonists who have worked in Australian journalism, some becoming household names, none deserves more recognition and praise for his generosity and practical assistance to young artists than gallery founder and curator, painter and art critic, author and fine cartoonist of distinction, Alan McCulloch.

Alan McLeod McCulloch was born in 1907 in the Melbourne seaside suburb of St Kilda. His family lived in Sydney for a time before returning to Melbourne, where McCulloch attended Scotch College from 1920 to 1922.

Before he became a professional cartoonist, McCulloch worked as a teller with the Commonwealth Bank, 'hating every minute of it' and yearning to be an artist like his younger brother Wilfred.¹ Finally, after a frustrating eighteen years as a bank teller, he decided in 1943 to quit his job and become an artist. Early family encouragement had come from his father, a mining and ship's engineer and amateur artist, and his brother Wilfred, who had introduced Alan to Arthur Boyd in the mid-1930s. Their meeting both boosted his enthusiasm to succeed in his newly chosen profession and also led to a life-long friendship.

McCulloch freely admitted that the greatest influence on his life as an artist was when Will Dyson, the renowned artist and cartoonist, was enticed back to Australia from London by Keith Murdoch in 1925 to work for the recently revamped *Melbourne Punch* and the *Herald*. Writing in the December 1981 issue of *Overland*,² McCulloch stated how Dyson was to present a lecture on the subject of pictorial satire and how the artist W. B. McInnes, Alan's art tutor, gave him a ticket for the lecture:

I didn't know what pictorial satire was but I was in the lecture hall at the N.G.V. [National Gallery of Victoria] half an hour before the lecture started. That lecture changed by my life and Dyson became my hero. I was eighteen at the time . . . I was very impressionable and that night I walked through a succession of doors whose existence I never previously suspected.

McCulloch wrote that his greatest ambition then was to meet his hero. This he finally achieved. On his first visit he describes Dyson's house in Wallace Ave, Toorak, a fashionable Melbourne address, as a rather untidy white one with white shutters and red tiled dragons on the roof.

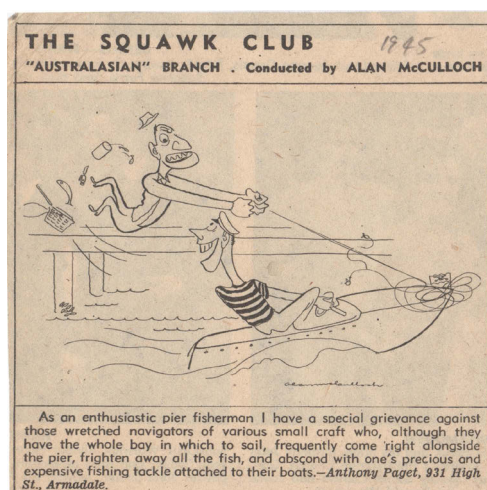
On greeting him, McCulloch could see that Dyson was apprehensive about the meeting. McCulloch noted that Dyson was careful to offer no encouragement about his talent revealed in the sheet of drawings that he had brought along for appraisal. But as McCulloch was leaving Dyson remarked, 'It would not matter what I said about not being an artist – you'd be one anyway'.



Magazine (unidentified) photo of Alan McCulloch, c. 1934.
Author's collection.

The measure of Alan's keenness can be appreciated when on future visits to Wallace Avenue he continued to tolerate Dyson's fits of savagery. His language was often appalling, and when it got too bad, 'I'd shrink behind a door, bookcase, easel, or perhaps the laundry mangle he had converted to an etching press'. What moved Dyson to these fits of rage (and rightly so) was when some junior editor altered his cartoon captions or changed a work. The young McCulloch persevered, as apparently did Dyson.

'Sometimes', McCulloch wrote, 'he would be all kindness and those moments were sheer bliss. And how I learned. I could learn more from Dyson in half an hour than I could learn at the N.G.V. in six months'. During these visits the young McCulloch, watching as Dyson printed the first series of drypoint etchings that were so successful in New York, was inspired to also produce a drypoint he titled 'The Coming Storm', a print of which joins other examples of his art held in the National Gallery of Victoria's collection.



Left: Alan McCulloch, [Neutrals]. Cartoon drawn for *Picture News*, 11 April 1940. 44.7 x 17.2cm. The McCulloch Collection, Ballarat Art Gallery. Purchased with funds from the Colin Hicks Caldwell Bequest, 2010. Reproduced courtesy of Susan McCulloch and the Art Gallery of Ballarat.

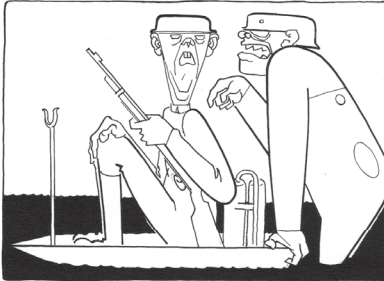
Right: Two 'Squawk Club' cartoons from the *Australasian Post*, c. 1945, by Alan McCulloch. Author's collection.

Whilst working as a bank teller, McCulloch had attended art classes at the National Gallery of Victoria and later at the Working Men's College (now RMIT). During this period his work was published in the ill-fated daily newspaper, the *Star*. In October 1933 the morning *Argus* decided to publish an evening paper to rival the *Herald*. However, the new paper was short-lived, ceasing publication in April 1936, believed by many as being

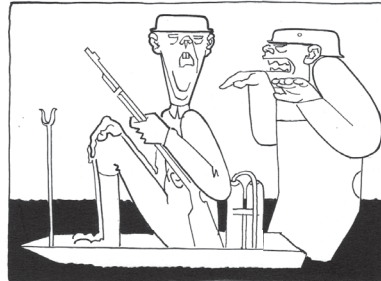
Gulderbrandt and the Gestapo

INTERRUPTION TO THE HUNT

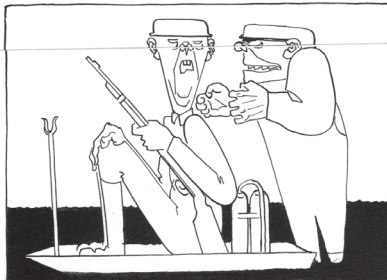
by ALAN McCULLOCH



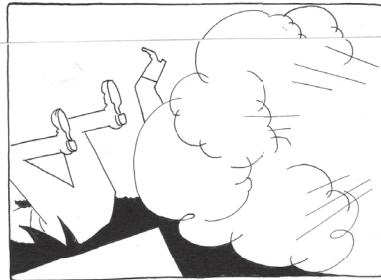
"YOU VILL PROCEED QUIETLY ACROSS DER CHANNEL
IN DER FLAT BOTTOMED BOAT



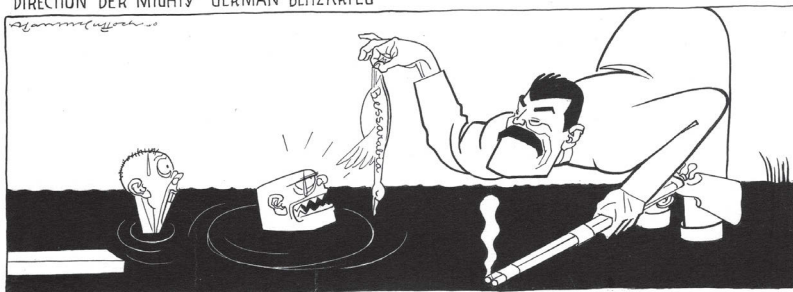
PUT DER GUN ON DER GUN REST AND
TAKE AIM AT DER BRITISH LION."



"DER STUPID LION NEVER KNOWS FROM WHICH
DIRECTION DER MIGHTY GERMAN BLITZKRIEG



VILL COMMENCE !



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Alan McCulloch, *Gulderbrandt and the Gestapo. Interruption to the Hunt*. Cartoon drawn for the *Picture News*, c. 1940. Ink and pencil on paper. Author's Collection.

due to industrial sabotage. It appears that out-of-date or upside down weather maps, wrong captions under pictures transposed headlines over news items and other damage was deliberately employed.

Around the time of his work for the *Star*, McCulloch published *So This Was the Spot* (1934), a souvenir of Melbourne's centenary. And in 1938 *Ballet Bogies* illustrated by Alan and his brother, Wilfred, appeared.



'Trapped in a bank, dreaming a life of freedom'. Drawing by Alan McCulloch of himself and his future wife, a fellow Commonwealth Bank worker, c. 1938. Reproduced in McCulloch's *Trial by Tandem*, Melbourne: Cheshire, 1950. Image courtesy of Susan McCulloch.

From these early publications Alan's line drawing skills, together with maturity of style are evident. Although he learned much from Will Dyson about becoming an artist, there is not the faintest hint of Dyson's graphic influence in McCulloch's approach or drawing style. His 'Guildabrandt' war time series for *Picture News* and later the *Australasian Post* were works drawn in the Art Deco style, a vogue that declared a new refined approach, elegant, whilst angular and geometric with thoughtful placing of back areas.

Initially McCulloch favoured the brush but his later work was drawn with the pen, the lines of fuse wire thickness pre-dating George Molnar's work a decade later.

Some time during 1944, McCulloch was invited to join the staff of the *Argus* as art critic. This organisation also published a weekly national magazine, *Picture Post*, to which Alan was also appointed as a cartoonist.

In this double role McCulloch instigated two regular features, 'The Squawk Club' in which he illustrated, in comic fashion, readers' complaints and domestic annoying situations (see p. 224). The other well-supported feature was the invitation to amateur and professional artists to submit cartoons for publication thereby encouraging a new generation of cartoonists.

However, he became, as did many others, an innocent victim of that dreadful era known as the 'Cold War' when the management of the *Argus* pressured him to ignore left wing artists or write unfavourably about them. As a result, he was dismissed in late 1946 for being fair, honest and outspoken.

Alan then, having saved and put aside some money, travelled to America where he married an Australian, Ellen Bromley. He wrote a light-hearted account of their travels across that country published as *Highway Forty*. Later the couple travelled through Europe on a tandem bicycle from Paris through France, and on to Positano in southern Italy. This odyssey, *Trial by Tandem*, was also published. Both books were illustrated by McCulloch.

In later life, Alan McCulloch became a luminary figure in Australian fine art circles, researching and publishing his monumental *Encyclopaedia of Australian Art, The Golden Age of Australian Painting*, a major study of the Heidelberg School, amongst others in an impressive list of art books. In 1971 he founded the Mornington Peninsula Arts Centre.

For his achievements and scholarly contribution to Australian art, in 1976 McCulloch was made a member of the Order of Australia.

Alan McCulloch, the revered friend of many, died in 1992.



'Hommage a l'art'. Drawing by Alan McCulloch reproduced in *Trial by Tandem*, Melbourne: Cheshire, 1950. Image courtesy of Susan McCulloch.