

On the cups of greatness

On the eve of the Melbourne Cup, a new book captures the colourful history of our most famous horse race

THE tale of the Melbourne Cup throws up a cast of characters that might have escaped from a novel by Charles Dickens or Mark Twain. They give the story a thumping pulse and help explain why on Tuesday the cup will be 150 years old and anything but dodderly.

Take George Hanlon, who died early this year, aged 92. Hanlon trained three cup winners, none of them famous, none bred in the purple or flashy lookers. Hanlon set them up. He coaxed them to be braver than they had ever been, to outrun their pasts on that first Tuesday in November.

You'd spot Hanlon coming towards you on a racecourse: an old man with a gentle smile playing on his face, as though he were sharing a private joke with himself, which he probably was, cheeks suffused with pink, wispy tufts of grey hair shivering in the breeze, and the inquisitive mind of a boy who wants to know why birds don't fall from the sky.

Part of Hanlon's appeal was his ability to mangle a metaphor. In *The Story of the Melbourne Cup*, Brian Meldrum, the former racing editor of the *Herald Sun*, recalls Hanlon's pronouncement after his gelding Arwon was beaten in a photo finish in the Caulfield Cup. A consoling — and, as it turned out, prescient — journalist said there was always the Melbourne Cup to look forward to. Yes, said Hanlon, but "a bird in

the frying pan is worth more than two birds flying in the air". Quite.

The great Bill Whittaker, as knowledgeable a racing journalist as there has ever been, contributes a chapter on another great character, the whip-slashing jockey Darby Munro. The "Demon Darb" won three Melbourne Cups, the last on Russia in 1946.

Whittaker died last year. This turned out to be his last piece and, typically, it not only reads effortlessly but also tells us things we didn't know, such as that when Munro won on Russia he was, if not still drunk, then as hungover as a pile of dead mice.

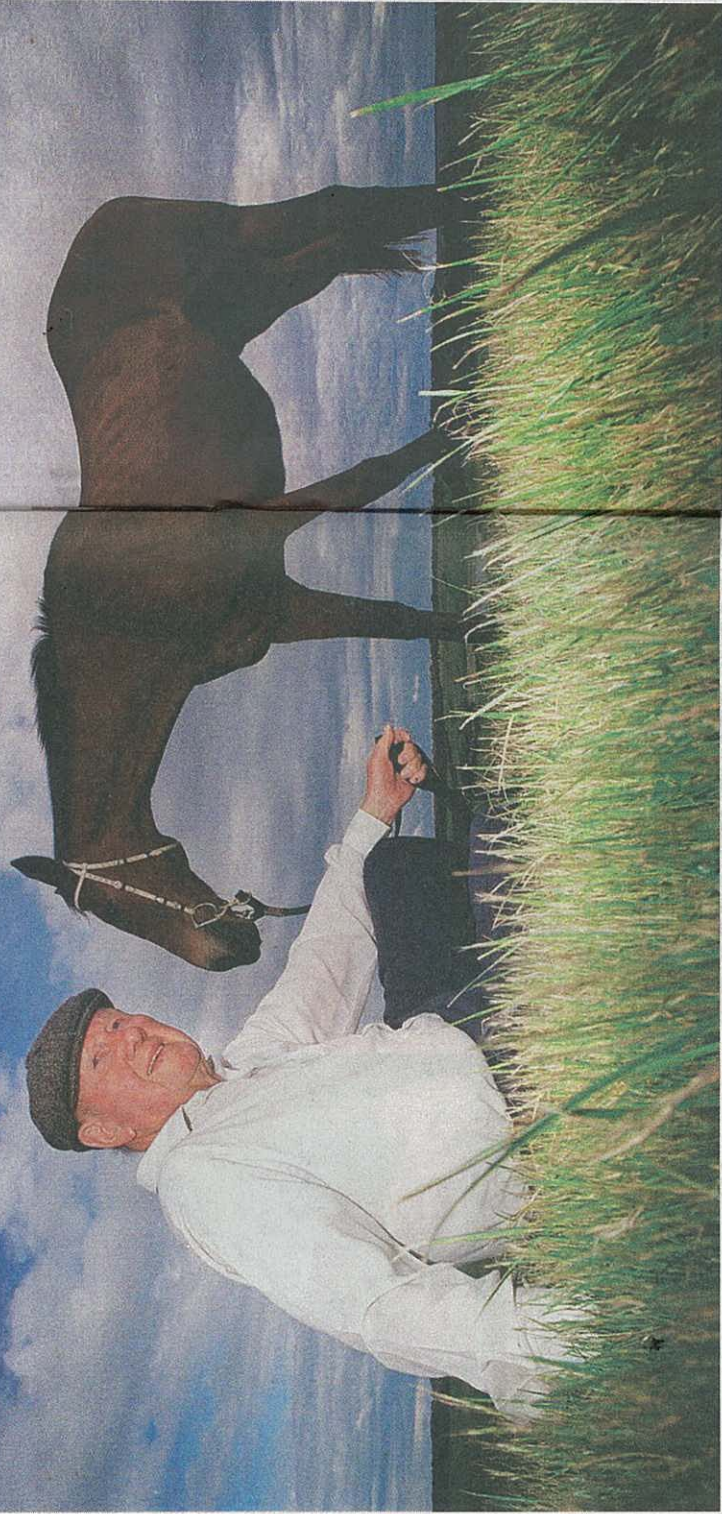
The second of Munro's three wives tells Whittaker that Munro wouldn't have passed a breath test that Tuesday.

He had wandered into a party on cup eve and arrived back at his hotel about 6am: drunk, pickled, rolling. He vomited on his way from the car park to the jockeys' room at Flemington, between nodding to well-wishers. He didn't have much to do, just ride in the most physically demanding flat race on the calendar. His drinking companion from the night before also made it to the course,

Les Carlyon

The Story of the Melbourne Cup

Edited by Stephen Howell
Slattery Media Group, 300pp, \$99.95 (HB)



Trainer George Hanlon, who died this year, with 1978 Melbourne Cup winner Arwon,

only to become so ill he had to be taken away by ambulance.

But, as Whittaker writes, Munro was an instinctive horseman. He soon had Russia fourth in a field of 35 and won by five lengths.

John Kerr is remembered for a similar incident three decades later, except he didn't ride and is thus beyond redemption.

Elsewhere in this book, published to mark the cup's 150th anniversary, Melbourne writer John Harris uses a single sentence to deliver the best description I've read of Jim Pike, Phar Lap's jockey, a polished horseman and hopeless punter. Pike, Harris writes, was a tall man with the look of drought in his face.

Neil Kearney, best known for his part in the Seven Network's cup coverage but also a gifted writer, tells of a conversation jockey John Letts claims to have had with the stallion Beldale Ball behind the barrier before the 1980 cup. Letts told his mount that three people had watched them leave

which died in 2007

front legs and the passing of 130 years. Rodney Johnson, the former chief executive of the Victoria Racing Club, tells how the cup was in trouble in the 1980s, and Bruce Clark, the TVN presenter, explains in a well-crafted chapter how the VRC rescued the race by reinventing it as an international event.

Stephen Romei, literary editor of this newspaper and a romantic seeker of quadrrelas (which is why he is still working), looks at the cup's literature and reminds us of C.J. Dennis's flawless ear for the Australian idiom ("Say, could yeh len' us 'arf a quid?").

There have been some good books on the cup, notably Maurice Cavanough's *The Melbourne Cup*, a chronological account first published in 1960 that ran to at least nine editions, and D.L. Bernstein's charming 1969 volume *First Tuesday in November*. This, however, may be the best yet.

Les Carlyon's books include *True Grit: Tales from 25 Years on the Turf*.

Anything but p

THIS brilliantly conceived and elegantly constructed biography of militant politician Percival Stanley Brookfield provides a unique insight into radical politics in Australia, and in Broken Hill and Sydney in particular, during a period of revolutionary politics and industrial militancy, especially around the time of the great Russian revolutions of March and October 1917.

As the extremist representative of the miners and other workers of Broken Hill from 1917 to 1921, Lancashire-born Brookfield is regarded as the most radical class warrior and anti-politician elected to an Australian parliament. For much of his time as the member for Sturt in the NSW parliament Brookfield was disgusted with the institution, which he characterised as a "den of iniquity and time-servers".

Yet, as Paul Robert Adams writes, even his parliamentary opponents realised that "the secret of Brookfield's hold on the Barrier workers" was that he was "utterly fearless and transparently sincere".

A big man of tremendous physical strength and mental agility who remained a bachelor and an avowed atheist throughout his fascinating life, Brookfield at the beginning of his political career campaigned strongly for health and safety in the mines of Broken Hill. He was a prominent anti-war and anti-censorship activist and an avid anti-conscriptionist in the Australian referendums of 1916 and 1917, yet was also a strong supporter of returned servicemen and their families.

Brookfield was a passionate advocate of the One Big Union, of the Big (or General) Strike and of militant direct action as the main means for mobilising a united working class against capitalistic oppression in Australia. All the while, when not in jail, Brookfield continued to work as a miner in Broken Hill and to promote the anti-war Labor's Volunteer Army and the militant amalgamated Miners' Association Army. In



Granta 112: Pakistan
Granta
288pp, \$27.99

IT'S timely to be reminded that Pakistan is about more than terrorism, Taliban and rogue nuclear technology. And yet this essential collection of beautifully written pieces puts the stylish erudition of some of the prominent Pakistani writers — thank you, colonialism, for making them so accessible to us — precisely to the task of



Water: The Vital Element
By Martin Summons,
Shepparton Heritage Centre
188pp, \$40

FROM one end of empire to another. Shepparton in Victoria's Goulburn Valley, which was settled in the mid-19th century, is emblematic of the settlement of Australia. The story is the full catastrophe: violent dispersal of the original inhabitants, the privations of settlers living far from civilisation, the stimulus of the cold Irish, the uncertainties of



The Verso Book of Dissent
Preface by Tariq Ali
Verso
366pp, \$29.95

SALUTARY reading in our "whatever" world, this incendiary anthology is co-edited by another Pakistani, the elegant firebrand Tariq Ali. From the impassioned anti-slavery polemics of Spartacus and Ali Ibn Muhammad, 600 years apart, to pleas for freedom and quality from a millennium worth of European, American, Arab and Chinese philosophers, and



In Praise of Copying
By Marcus Boon
Harvard University Press
285pp, \$42.95

GERMAN critic Walter Benjamin wrote some immensely influential words on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Luxury fashion houses would say something shorter and sharper and much more legally binding on the rip-off merchants who fake their products. Marcus Boon, a Canadian English professor with an

