



## 'Don't wait to be told': the golden age of the Australian advertising agency

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BOOK REVIEW



## 'Don't wait to be told': the golden age of the Australian advertising agency

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***Behind Glass Doors: The World of Australian Advertising Agencies 1959–1989***, by Robert Crawford and Jackie Dickenson, Crawley (Western Australia), UWA Publishing, 2016, xx+320 pp., \$35, ISBN 9781742586670 (paperback), Publisher's website: <https://uwap.uwa.edu.au/>

Even decades after their fleeting existence has come to an end, I can still sing the jingles of 1970s advertisements. I can still 'whistle up a deal at Watson Holden', or 'dine with the Baron tonight' – ads that would play during the Saturday afternoon football radio broadcasts in Melbourne. I still can't pick up a bar of a certain brand of soap without recalling that I shouldn't 'wait to be told' that I 'need Palmolive Gold'. Having long ago turned back to butter, I'm less convinced that Meadow Lea is the 'good taste in spread'.

All of this would suggest either that I have a head for catchy tunes or that the advertisers did their work well. Robert Crawford and Jackie Dickenson show that the latter is probably so, as they take us behind the glass doors to observe how the Australian advertising sausage was made during the classical age of modern advertising – roughly the 1950s to the 1980s. They have produced a fine business history, doing many of the things for our understanding of Australian advertising that Bridget Griffen-Foley, for instance, has done for media history. The focus is not on the advertisements as texts – a cultural studies favourite – but on advertising as an industry.

The American period drama *Mad Men* stalks this book – two chapters begin with references to episodes in the series. Crawford and Dickenson show that the revolution made on New York's Madison Avenue would also reshape Australian advertising. Overseas agencies had played some role in Australia earlier in the century: J. Walter Thompson began operating in Australia in 1930 after it bagged the General Motors account. The pattern was repeated in 1959 when another major international player, McCann-Erickson, opened an office in Sydney. It, too, was following a big client, in this case Coca-Cola.

The same multinational companies would later look to Australia as a base for extending their activities to Southeast Asia, thereby building on the experience and expertise that Australian advertisers had built up over decades in dealing with their near north. One of Asia's most successful post-war advertising firms, the Hong Kong-based Cathay, was owned and run by a remarkable Australian woman, Elma Kelly, whose career in advertising had begun in the 1930s. But a stint in Asia increasingly became a common line in the resumé of a rising Australian advertising executive or creative, as companies with their regional headquarters in Australia set up offices there, or acquired local agencies.

Crawford and Dickenson reveal an industry based increasingly on the mobility of its skilled workers. Cheaper and faster jet travel would magnify this quality from the 1960s, incidentally contributing to advertising's glamorous image. The Australian industry was less specialised, corporate and research-driven than the American – rather like your average colonial tradesman, an Australian advertiser was expected to be an all-rounder – and Australia could not match the opportunities available to creatives in London. Nonetheless, not only did Australians work in London and New York, British and American advertising professionals made careers in Australia.

The industry's balance of power shifted from the late 1960s. Boutique agencies or 'hot shops' were opened by creatives such as John Singleton frustrated with life in the larger, often overseas-owned concerns. The new agencies, such as Singleton's SPASM and Mojo in Sydney and MDA and the Campaign Palace in Melbourne, emphasised creativity and, in the case of SPASM and Mojo, promoted advertising with a brashly Australian style. Account managers – 'the suits' – found themselves increasingly subordinate to an agency's 'creatives'. The long lunch became famous, at least before Paul Keating spoiled the party with a Fringe Benefits Tax. Creatives commanded increasingly extravagant salaries. But all this would come to an end in the straightened times of the early 1990s, and as the marketing executives of major companies demanded more bang for fewer bucks.

*Behind Glass Doors* is a valuable account of an industry, based on a prodigious number of interviews with current or former advertising industry professionals – 120 in all – as well as a wide range of other sources little used by Australian historians. It takes us beyond the movers and shakers and the prominent names to the back rooms of the agencies. We gain a picture of how careers have been built, but also of the diverse roles performed within these businesses, most of them far from glamorous. As such, the book will be of interest to the many thousands of people who have worked in advertising or with advertisers, as well as to scholars in the fields of advertising, business and labour history, and the history of the professions.

But *Behind Glass Doors* is valuable for other reasons. Advertising agencies have provided employment to some of the country's most creative people in other fields: the novelists Peter Carey and Bryce Courtenay, for instance; the broadcaster Phillip Adams; and the artist Ken Done. Advertisers have been influential players in our political system – think of Singleton as the Labor Party's advertiser in the 1987 election – and they have been critical in creating the images that make and remake national identity. Through a study of advertising, we often gain a glimpse of the changes that have transformed modern Australia: the rise of tertiary-educated professionals and 'the creative class', the impact of globalisation and new technologies, the declining relationship with Britain as it was replaced by the United States and Asia, the rise of the new nationalism, and changing patterns of gender.

Crawford and Dickenson are very good on this last theme. Women have long been a significant proportion of the staff in advertising agencies, but they have only rarely occupied senior roles. As account management became subordinate to the creative department in agencies, women entered accounts – a pattern found in many other industries whereby as jobs become less remunerative and prestigious, they open up to women. Things did change but many agencies maintained a blokey culture that marginalised women, and some were notorious for their sexism.

*Behind Glass Doors* provides a valuable perspective on an industry in its golden era. The authors, finishing their story in 1989, leave advertising on the brink of recession, the digital revolution and the rise of the internet. There must surely still be creative advertisers out there, but Crawford and Dickenson seem justified in concluding that the industry's 'glory days', the product of post-war consumer capitalism, will not return.