

Charley's heroes and champions

JESSICA OWERS is entranced by a racing man's presentation of great art associated with the turf.



H. PALMER: The jaunty painting of the Australian Champion Sweepstakes, housed at the National Library of Australia.

Time waits for no man, but it seems to wait for Bob Charley. At 76 years old he is like a fallen power line, all crackling, ageless energy.

In Australian racing, Charley's knowledge is vast and his contribution great; so great, in fact, that he was inducted an Officer in the Order of Australia nearly 15 years ago. He was a chairman of the Australian Jockey Club (AJC), of Racing NSW and the Australian Racing Board. He worked in print, radio and television, trained a horse or two, gambled, and swung with the baggers for a time.

These days, he chairs the selection panel for the Australian Racing Hall of Fame and is a trustee of Royal Randwick. He also directs (and sponsors) the Bill Whittaker Award, every second year

decorating the best racing writing in the country. But he hasn't quit his day jobs. Charley is a property developer, timber miller, restaurant owner and wine grower, and his mining pedigree is spectacular.

"My grandfather was the man who discovered silver at Broken

Charley's home at Port Macquarie is on copper country, acreage that his grandfather assumed in 1906. He is proud of this, because history is the cog that moves him. And when it comes to horse racing, what Charley doesn't know about history

“The golden age of painting racehorses in Australia was really the latter part of the 19th century.”

BOB CHARLEY

Hill,” he says. “At the age of 18 he was a jackaroo, and at 19 he was a millionaire. He owned the Great Fitzroy mine, out of Rockhampton, and what's significant about that is his partner was Herbert Hoover, who became the 31st president of the United States.”

can be carved on the head of a needle. It's why he was so qualified to fill the magnificent, sateen pages of *Heroes & Champions*, his latest book.

Published in late 2014, the book is a record of Australian racing through the art of a great many painters. Martin

Stainforth is there, Frederick Woodhouse and Stuart Reid, and contemporaries Alister Simpson and Michael Jeffery. The earliest Hyde Park and Flemington courses are there, as are countless portraits of the greatest equine champions. In total, Charley has included 140 paintings, sourced from racing clubs and private collections.

“It goes like this,” he says, recounting with bouncy clarity the origins of *Heroes & Champions*. “I started working on it around 2007. I'd seen a marvellous book in England written by David Oldrey, which depicts the great paintings owned by the Jockey Club, and/or the great trophies, furniture, and so on. I wasn't going to go into that much detail, but I thought it was an inspiration.”

Oldrey's book is *The Jockey Club Rooms: A Catalogue and*

History of the Collection, and it was just the push that Charley needed. In truth, he had wandered the corridors of the AJC for years, gazing at paintings that screamed as much about Australian racing as any photograph, wondering what he could do with them.

“I’d always been in love with Martin Stainforth as an artist,” Charley says of the British born artist (1866-1957) best known for his paintings of horses in England, Australia and the United States. “I think he is certainly in the top four or five equine artists of all time. I wondered how I might be able to do them [his paintings] justice.”

For the first five years of the *Heroes & Champions* venture Charley did little more than look around Australia for art. There was plenty among the racing clubs, but he wanted others: the ones rarely seen, or never publicly seen. He posted advertisements in major newspapers and got a few responses that amounted to little, while in the background, the ‘bush telegraph’ did its thing. Friends of friends came forward, as did dynasty collectors like the Tait, Waterhouse and Dufficy families.

“I kept an Excel file of every painting I found, alphabetically,” Charley says. “I noted the horse, the year, who the artist was, and where the painting was. When I got to six or seven hundred, I began to sort them according to what I thought I should use, and what I thought should be discarded.”

At about 700 paintings, he had a staggering record of



MARTIN STAINFORTH: ‘The Grey Leads’, famous for depicting the complete jumping action of a racehorse.

organised racing since 1810. The challenge was to cull the count to 140.

Charley says that in terms of volume of output, there have been five major racing artists in this country—Stainforth, Woodhouse, Joseph Fowles, Simpson and Jeffery—and the work of each is heavily featured in the book. However, there were certain iconic portraits that were included on reputation alone.

“Look at the marvellous painting of Phar Lap by Stuart Reid,” he says. “Reid didn’t have an output like these other artists. He painted things other than just racehorses, whereas I think Stainforth, Woodhouse, Simpson and Jeffery virtually

concentrated, or concentrate, on horse racing.”

Heroes & Champions is a time machine. Each page is presented with an abundance of white space, simple, succinctly written essays, and then the explosive colour and beauty of each painting. Some are moody, like the 1845 depiction of Flemington Racecourse. Some are delightful, like the Australian Champion Sweepstakes of 1859. Others, even the modern ones, are hypnotic, like the portrait of Sunline by artist Ewa, of whom nothing is known. With its autumnal hues and respect of light and shade, it is hard to believe this one is so recent.

Charley’s long search for

paintings peeled back some sociological history too.

“The golden age of painting racehorses in Australia was really the latter part of the 19th century,” he says. “Photography hadn’t come in yet, and everybody had their horses painted. The really dry period was between 1929 and 1967, because there was the Depression and then the Second World War. They just weren’t painting horses then.”

He rues this fact. There were a great many champions in this era for which great portraits do not exist.

“Todman is a classic case,” he says. “The only painting of this horse is the one done many years after he raced, >



EWA: The Sunline portrait by artist Ewa, of whom nothing is known, housed at the Victoria Racing Club.



JOSEPH FOWLES: The magnificent portrait of Archer.



BOB CHARLEY: brings his books up and down Australia, piled high in the boot of his car.

when a book was put together in New Zealand and they commissioned paintings of horses from the past.”

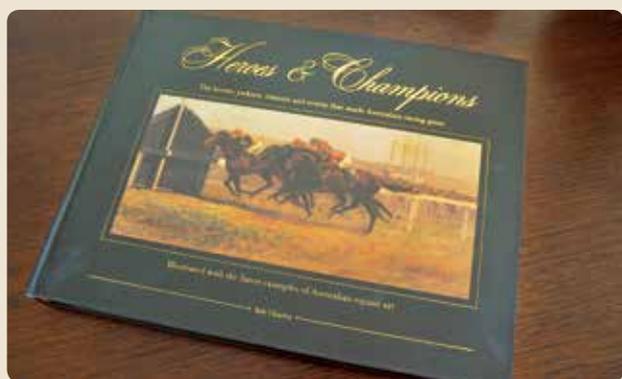
Heroes & Champions covers the racing era 1810 to 2000, simply because, as Charley puts it, he had to stop somewhere. He strove to represent equally each great era in Australian racing, and admits he had to leave out some incredible

paintings. Likewise, he had to include some inferior ones.

He employed three photographers to photograph for him, and relied on many private collectors to travel their pieces, which they did. Only Charley, with his nimble, second-to-none reputation, could have expected such commitment.

Sales of the book have been strong. With only 1000 copies printed, and no chance of a second run, Charley has only a few hundred left. Hawkesbury Race Club purchased a copy for each winning owner for its Guineas meeting, and the interest from country clubs has been immense, something that can't be said, he admits, of the city clubs. But he isn't concerned about that. He brings his books up and down Australia, piled high in the boot of his car.

The man they call 'Banjo Bob'—he is renowned for his recitations of the works of Banjo Paterson—has already moved on to his next publishing project, a series of three books that will document elements of Australia's rarest racing past. **U**



Heroes & Champions
By Bob Charley

See heroesandchampions.com.au
\$165 (incl. postage)
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THAT RACE: Bonecrusher (Gary Stewart), outside, beats Our Waverley Star (Lance O'Sullivan).

Vale the immortal Bonecrusher

BY STEPHEN HOWELL

New Zealand's other Big Red, Bonecrusher, was put down aged 32 on June 10 after vets could do no more to ease his pain from the hoof disease laminitis.

There is only one Big Red in Australian racing, Phar Lap, the legend Kiwis claim as their own, but the adoration for Bonecrusher's class and courage is such that at times in New Zealand he is referred to with the reverence usually reserved for Phar Lap.

That doesn't mean the 'Crusher wasn't adored in Australia, where his legend was made when he beat Our Waverley Star in the 1986 Cox Plate (2040m) at Moonee Valley, the final 700 metres a duel that left the rest of the field behind, brought the crowd to its feet and gave the spectacle the "race of the century" tag.

The legend has grown, of course, with the regular repetition of the race call by Bill Collins that climaxed with the words "and Bonecrusher races into equine immortality".

Renowned racing writer Les Carlyon, in his book *True Grit*, said of Collins,

"voice now hoarse, he came up with poetry".

Carlyon also wrote that Bonecrusher, after the win was "legless but still standing".

Our Waverley Star, who won 13 of 34 races, was put down after a breaking a leg in a paddock accident in March 1991.

Bonecrusher was farewelled this June in his Auckland paddock by those who looked after him when he raced and since his retirement in 1990—trainer Frank Ritchie, his wife Colleen and their son Shaune (now a trainer, then the horse's strapper) and owners Peter and Shirley Mitchell.

BONECRUSHER

Ch g 1982,
Pag Asa-Imitation (NZ),
by Oakville (GB)

44 races for 18 wins,
5 seconds, 12 thirds

Nine Group 1 wins.
In Australia—1986: Tancred Stakes, Australian Derby, Caulfield Stakes, Cox Plate, Underwood Stakes.

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