

**Australia's motorcycle racing historian and author, Don Cox, gave the keynote address at the official launch of *The Sultan of Slide – a privateer's story* at the Southport Library on 10 May, 2103 (10 May being Bob Mitchell's birthday)**

I'm honoured to do this for Mark and Jean. It's a fine book. Bob Mitchell left all the building blocks with his diaries and clippings. Mark has done a great job in both assembling and adding his observations.

What is it about sidecar racers? We now have two books devoted entirely to 1950 Australian internationals and both were produced by the sons of sidecar racers, Bernie Mack Jnr and now Mark Mitchell. But we only have one autobiography from a solo rider of the day, Trevor Pound.

So what does Bob's story tell us? First, about the Australian sense of adventure. The 1950s group had grown up through the great depression and a World War.

Bob was 22 when he and Max George left Melbourne on a dilapidated ocean liner. But like so many Australians who joined the Continental Circus, they succeeded with a combination of ingenuity, mateship and determination.

You needed ingenuity when your equipment broke in the middle of a race or half way up a mountain pass. And you didn't quit easily when you had travelled 18,000 km chasing a dream. You mucked in and made the best of it.

As Eric Hinton put it, Australians have always been adaptable and able to think outside the square. And typically, they thought it was no big deal. It wasn't done to bignote yourself.

Second, about the power of imagination. These racers had read about classic racing in the English motorcycle newspapers and heard the radio reports each year from the Isle of Man. They might have seen some newsreel footage of European racing. That's different to being there, choosing a line between hedge rows and stone walls...some were gob smacked when they first rode around the TT course.

However, riding the motorcycle and maintaining a motorcycle – those were the parts the racers already knew. It was all the other stuff they had to learn...negotiating starts, living on the road for months at a time, dealing with a different language and currency every other week, border crossings, customs duties and the rest.

Modern racers travel with an entourage. In the 1950s, at best you might have a mate as helper, and some of those helpers were reasonable mechanics. For some riders, the sole help was their new bride.

They travelled a Europe that was still rebuilding, a Europe divided by what Winston Churchill called the Iron Curtain. Australians and New Zealanders were probably the first international sports people to venture into the Eastern Bloc to compete.

They were very different times. Who would understand the Austerity Period in Britain, which Jean lived through? Post-war rationing finally ended in 1954, the year Bob arrived in Europe, with restrictions on meat lifted.

Who under the age of 30 knows about the Suez Crisis, the Cold War and the Berlin Wall?

And how would any motorcycle racing fan react today if the governing body suspended the reigning world MotoGP champion for six months? It happened to Geoff Duke for supporting the private riders in the 1955 Dutch TT strike.

There was no Court of Arbitration for Sport then...No consumer protection laws if your 400 pounds worth of Manx Norton broke its connecting rod in its first race.

As for markers in history, 1954 was the year when Roger Banister ran the first sub four-minute mile, the first transistor radio was developed, the first Boeing 707 flew and the world's first nuclear submarine was commissioned. It was the year Lord of the Rings was published. (I saw they're still celebrating that in New Zealand.)

In music, Freddy Fender launched his new electric guitar the Stratocaster. Bill Hailey recorded Rock Around The Clock and a totally unknown truck driver named Elvis Aaron Presley sang That's All Right Mama.

Fifty four also brought the so-called short-stroke Manx Norton models, which Bob used throughout his international career.

In Europe, private entrants were almost spoiled for choice in where to race. In France alone there were 34 road race meetings. The trick was having your business hat on...to secure the best possible starting money deal on any particular weekend, even if it meant travelling another thousand kilometres and crossing two more borders.

Bob Mitchell and Max George were two of the new class of '54, along with Jack Ahearn, Maurie Quincey and Dick Thomson.

Keith Campbell, heading into his second Continental Circus season, was on the same ship as Bob heading England. I'll draw your attention to the photo on page 24 for some of the hazards of the long voyage. Further proof that times may change, but racer DNA does not.

Meantime, Gordon Laing had wintered in Birmingham and Bob's hero Ken Kavanagh had joined the Moto Guzzi team. Keith Bryen was there briefly, until he broke his collar bone. They did not plate collar bones in '54.

But at least he made it home. In 1954, Laurie Boulter and Gordon Laing did not.

Look through that list of riders and you'll appreciate that the Continental Circus adventure attracted a variety of riders. Bob Mitchell and Maurie Quincey were at the business end of the scale. Bob was there to win and if he couldn't secure the equipment he needed to win, it was time to do something else. He sailed home not long after he turned 25, international career over. And we think Casey Stoner stopped too young, having just turned 27.

After the international career came domination at home. With skills polished by three seasons in Europe, Bob rode at a different level to the locals. It is extraordinary to read the letters in local motorcycle press, complaining that Bob was so good. Did they not want to see the best? The solo riders relished the opportunity to measure themselves against returning internationals.

It is important to preserve these stories, even the unflattering comments in the letters to AMCN on page 124.

The story of the Continental Circus racers is important Australian history, albeit on the other side of the world, with incredible tales of valour, bastardry, tragedy and humour.

Listen to these people, re-read the diaries and the letters. Bob's was a rollicking good story of high drama, adventure, romance and success that few back home ever knew about. In every way, a long way from suburban Australia of the 50s. (I'm just old enough to remember that was dull and the taste of soggy, over-cooked green beans.)

I don't want to simply rehash the book's Foreword, but I do want to wrap up by saying Bob Mitchell was a great source for *Australian Motorcycle Heroes* and *Circus Life*... especially his insights into the travel and the precarious lifestyle if a racers' equipment was not reliable... about being hard headed in not loaning spares parts you might need at the next race.

And about what you can do with 50 horsepower and a hard, skinny rear tyre. That's why Bob was the Sultan of Slide.

Please enjoy the book and thank you.