

The Art of Kilmeny

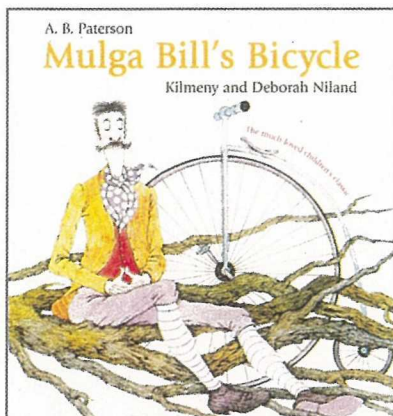
By Maurice Saxby



Early photograph of Kilmeny and her boys.
From left: Hugh, Leo, Thomas (on Kilmeny's
lap) and Patrick.

*In February this year Australia lost not only one of its most talented children's book illustrators but a fine artist in her own right having had numerous successful exhibitions of her work both here in Australia and overseas. Indeed, hidden behind her success with over forty-five illustrated books is a raft of artistic genres: meticulous studies of wild life; portraits — including a sensitive study of her mother, Ruth Park — miniatures, which gained her the Combined Societies of Miniature Art Award in 2000; boxed Christmas cards from **A Bellbird in a Flame Tree** (1989); and prints; as well as animation.*

*Not surprisingly, Kilmeny's versatility, her professionalism and her integrity as an artist won her awards such as that of the Visual Arts Board in 1974 for Banjo Paterson's **Mulga Bill's Bicycle**, shared with her sister Deborah; a book which has never been out of print. Her **Feathers, Fur and Frills**, a wonderfully detailed study of Australian wildlife such as the Bearded Dragon and the Marsupial Mouse with succinct text accompanied by careful, detailed, accurate and beguiling paintings, understandably won the Whitley Award, Best Children's Book in 1980. Kilmeny wrote once, 'This book was a pleasure to work on' — and that enjoyment is evident throughout her body of work. In 1984 came a further study, **Bright Eyes and Bushy Tails**, also rising out of a devotion to nature and a dedication to detailed excellence. Such studies featured in a striking exhibition at the Artarmon Galleries in September 2001. Animal life was passion with this sensitively perceptive artist and found expression in her animal studies such as a series of four *Animal Spotters* for Margaret Hamilton Books ranging from **Animals at Work** (1994) to **Animals at Home** (1994), each of which indicate a keen eye for detail and a deep understanding of the subject.*



Mulga Bill's Bicycle published in 1973 is an early collaboration between Kilmeny and Deborah Niland. It has never been out-of-print.



www.kilmenyniland.com

Niland

Daughter of Ruth Park and D'Arcy Niland, Kilmeny was born in New Zealand but educated in Sydney and studied art at the Julian Ashton Art School there before taking off to London with Deborah, both working as freelance artists. This led to a collaboration that produced **The Little Goat** in 1971 when the twins were in their very early twenties. Then followed publications that included two picture stories written by their mother; illustrated novels such as Elizabeth Wilton's **Riverview Kids**; two of Jean Chapman's collection of tales, songs, verses and things for young children to make and do as well as **Birds on a Bough** (1975) which exemplifies the Niland sense of humour — frivolous-looking birds crowding the bough until it breaks. It exemplified the sisters' sense of the ridiculous, their keen eye for caricature and clever but never hurtful burlesque.

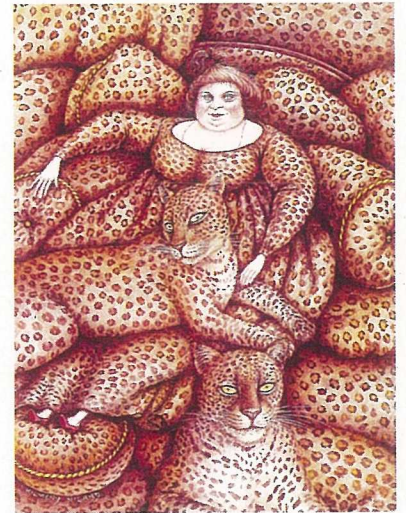
As successful as was the partnership of the two sisters they wisely decided, without fanfare, to each follow her own path, to become her own person. Although there are similarities of style in some works, from the seventies onward each was to develop her own distinctive oeuvre. Each demonstrated always a telling sense of humour, the ability to pin-point human quirks and foibles, to use cartoonish exaggeration without ever holding the subject up to ridicule. Certainly there is a sense of the bizarre and the ridiculous but never unfairly so. This is illustrated in Kilmeny's miniatures such as the punk with the Mohawk hairdo and the cross dangling from the left ear, yet with a penetrating gaze that indicates an inner strength. She was able to create humorous and telling epigrams in pictures. By the same token the artist was experimental and took risks as shown in fine art pieces such as 'Camouflage' which she acknowledges as a light-hearted look at the camouflage of pattern. I wanted to see if I could paint a picture utilising one pattern [leopards] only.

Hers was an enquiring mind that led to a tremendous range of styles and subjects. For **The Window Book** (1992) by Sally Farrell Odgers she was to write: *I was attracted to this imaginative story. The main task was to make the surreal quality in the book credible. I tackled this with the use of colour. The 'real' part of the story was painted in subdued colour in contrast to the bright colours of the 'fantasy' pictures.*

Kilmeny's interests, talents and genres are remarkable for one who is so well known and highly regarded as an illustrator of children's books. Early in her career (the 70s) she displayed a feeling for traditional literature: fairy stories and tales that belong to the folk; a universality. She was to illustrate collections such as **Old Witch Boneyleg** (1978) by the English writer, Ruth Manning Sanders; a **Fairy Tale Picture Dictionary** (1979) and further collections of Jean Chapman such as **Pancakes and Painted Eggs: A Book for Easter** and **All the Days of the Year** (1981) which although light-hearted exudes a warm humanity — a quality that infuses all Kilmeny's array of artistic and literary categories. So Kilmeny Niland was perhaps an obvious choice to illustrate crazy tales of eccentric humans



Frill Necked Lizard from **Feathers, Fur and Frills**.



Camouflage: a light-hearted look at the camouflage of pattern. I wanted to see if I could paint a picture utilising one pattern only.



Miniatures: *Honey Possum* and *Home for Christmas*—perhaps the follow up to the Punk mentioned in text?—see at www.kilmenyniland.com Originals are 3x3 inches.



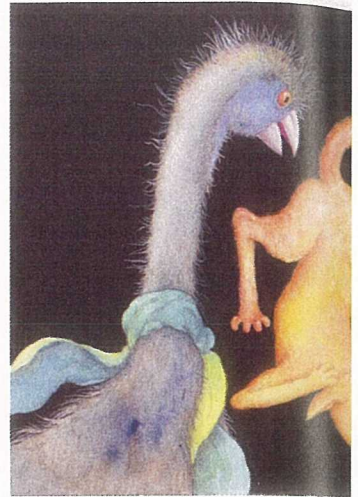
Marine Iguana from **Bright Eyes and Bushy Tails**.



The two teddies practising *being brave ... and bold* p.14, **Two Tough Teddies**.



such as **Grandad Barnett's Beard** (1988) by Kristine Church for which the zany illustrations underline the essential truth that companionship transcends barriers of age and even culture. In Church's **My Brother John** (1990) the illustrator further demonstrates her outstanding empathy for young children, including pre-schoolers, always adding the spice of her own insights into the inner sensory, emotional and developmental world of early childhood. This becomes growingly evident over the years, both in her illustrations for her own texts and the use of traditional nursery stories and adaptations of literary fairytales such as **The Gingerbread Man** and Hans Andersen's **The Ugly Duckling**. Both have an obvious appeal to pre-school children and are ideal for parent or adult sharing as lap books and then for exploratory handling by the child. The colours are bright, the figures have a genuine naivety, a toy-like quality, even a slyness — see the fox enticing the gingerbread man. There is also a domesticity combined with movement and controlled action that introduces children to narrative devices such as anticipation and resolution. The bonus that comes with these two titles is that they are labelled 'Flip the Flap', so inviting the 'reader' to become explorative by lifting a flap over hidden complementary pictures, thus becoming an active participator in the action.



Subtle characterisation in **Blossum Possum** that stops short of caricature.



The big pudgy pudden: **Fat Pat** p.7.

Such paper engineering is used again and requires even greater manual dexterity in handling Kilmeny's pop-ups! created for Yvonne Morrison's **An Aussie Night Before Christmas Pops Up!** (2007), based on their previous collaboration, **An Aussie Night Before Christmas** published in 2005. Here the Niland illustrations triumphantly not only capture the mood of the irreverent Australianisation of the text in which Santa looks like:

*a swaggie
unfastening his pack*

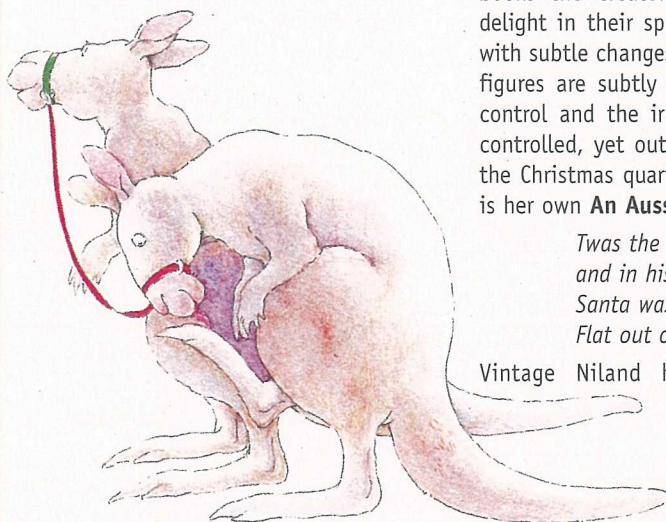
(the best Santa illustration ever!)

but every page contains a 'dinki-di' Christmas icon such as crackers, lanterns or poinsettias. Yet along with the hilarity there is an ethereal quality achieved through appropriately blue-toned spreads such as that showing two small children tenderly waving farewell to Santa in his truck of goodies being drawn across the sky by a team of kangaroos under a Yuletide moon overshadowed by a graceful gum-tree. Two years later Kilmeny worked with Colin Buchanan and Greg Champion (Bucko & Champs) to produce a vigorous song book complete with CD, **Fair Dinkum Aussie Christmas** with songs like *Deck the Shed with Bits of Wattle* and *Australians Let us Barbecue*. Here, as in each of the Christmas books the creators obviously work with relish, taking great delight in their spoofing. Kilmeny provides sly visual overtones with subtle changes of mood for each rollicking verse. Her human figures are subtly hilarious, the purposeful vulgarity always in control and the irreverence never offensive. Possibly the most controlled, yet outrageous (yet with a touch of wistfulness), of the Christmas quartet, and bearing Kilmeny's indubitable stamp, is her own **An Aussie Day Before Christmas** (2008):

*Twas the day before Christmas
and in his beach shack,
Santa was snoozing
Flat out on his back.*

Vintage Niland here, the artwork ranges from prancing kangaroos, a red-capped Kooka, a beefy Santa to Sheila Claus calling *Seeya later* with the injunction *Drive carefully, please!* It comes as no surprise that the book is dedicated,

'For all the helpers of furry creatures at wires.org.au'.



Kangaroos from **Aussie Night Before Christmas Pops Up!**





A further Australiana spoof is Gina Newton's **Blossom Possum: the sky is falling down-under** (2006), modelled on the folktale of 'Henny Penny, the sky is falling'. Here again the Niland touch adds not only colourfully designed pages but a careful interpretation of the text and subtle characterisation that stops short of caricature. Kilmeny Niland always does her authors proud by nourishing the text and adding a dimension that derives from her own fertile view of life. Hers is an amazing gift.

That gift is no more evident than in **The ABC Book of Nursery Rhymes** (2000) for which Kilmeny was one of thirteen contributors to this collection of traditional rhymes. Then, too, it is self-evident in what could be termed illustrated nursery stories that tap in perfectly to the deep, if unexpressed, needs of preschool children: the need for security; to be loved and accepted; to lavish affection on even inanimate toys; to be knowingly naughty but to want forgiveness and reconciliation. It is perhaps in Kilmeny's most recent picture story books that such insights and skills become wonderfully realised. **Fat Pat** (2008) along with **Two Tough Teddies** (2007) and its companion **Two Bad Teddies** (2009) are glorious domestic tales for reading to the young who will then pore over them enjoying the subtle humour that cause adults to smile, even chuckle, and small children to crow with delight. Each is dramatic in child terms, a perfect introduction to the structure and cadence of language and to literary form.

Fat Pat is undoubtedly born from the author's deeply affectionate nature as proven by the moving dedication:

'With love to my mother Ruth & my sister Deborah, who love all dogs, fat and thin'.

Fat Pat was a very sweet dog. Everybody loved him.

So opens the family saga of the *big pudgy pudden* who runs away but is finally returned safely into the family fold. Told in simple rhythmic language that has both assonance and alliteration the plot follows the literary pattern of crises leading to a wonderfully comforting conclusion. The narrative is perfectly complemented by the illustrations, a balanced combination of perky line drawings and atmospheric paintings. It is not surprising that it and the **Two Tough Teddies** were listed in the NSW Premier's Reading Challenge.

The two Teddies are equally endearing. One glance at the beguiling pair on the cover of the first book and their expressive eyes and the tale is under way. The Teddies' character is caught with exactitude and with promise. Again the paintings are mood pieces and complement the emotions evoked by the text. As the lovable pair set out in search *for someone to love them* a handsome caterpillar, balancing on a leaf looks down somewhat superciliously at them. A telling touch! In the second installment of their adventures the Teddies are more mischievous than bad, but as in the old fables the biters are bit when they vent their jealousy on the toy, Bendy Bill. Then ironically the tables are turned, and Bendy Bill comes to the rescue of Gruffy, one of the offending Teddies. This contemporary but timeless fabulist tale with its intuitive insights into child psychology, its linguistic balance and artistic vitality — the final offering from such a warm and talented artist — must remain forever a monument to a consummate painter and word-smith who has given generously of herself to both literature and to a vast field of artistic endeavour.

Deborah Niland is currently curating Kilmeny Niland's art works and we thank her for permission to reprint the illustrations used in this article and for supplying the images.



The last illustration from Kilmeny's last book, **Two Bad Teddies** to be published by Little Hare in August 2009.



Last page of **An Aussie Night Before Christmas: Merry Christmas to all, and goodonya mates!**



The best santa illustration ever (Saxby) pp.23 and 32 **An Aussie Night Before Christmas**.

