

'I AM BUT A MERE FAN' concluded a 1998 missive to 'Roy and HG' at Triple J.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I intercept some of the fan mail received by Australian radio and television personalities in the 1980s and 1990s. The article focuses on letters received by Ruth Cracknell, who starred as Maggie Bear in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's sitcom *Mother and Son* (1984-94), and by 'Roy Slaven' (John Doyle) and 'HG Nelson' (Greig Pickhaver), who have been co-presenting satirical sports programs on Australia's airwaves since 1986.

"Thousands of letters are received annually by each station" wrote a 2UW humourist in a long article on "The Broadcasting Mail Bag" for Sydney's *Wireless Weekly* in 1928. Radio fan mail was an international phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> As one American commentator remarked in the late 1920s, broadcasting made "thousands of people feel free to sit down and write a friendly and personal letter to a large corporation."<sup>3</sup> Within two years of its formation in 1932, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) let it be known that it employed a staff of several 'girls' dedicated to sorting, and helping to co-ordinate responses to, listeners' mail.<sup>4</sup>

With no formal mechanisms for audience research, the ABC and commercial broadcasters were keen for programming suggestions.<sup>5</sup> In the United States too, individual stations and major networks used listeners' letters to estimate audience

◀ Figs 1 & 1a. Fan mail from the State Library of New South Wales.

IMAGES: BRIDGET GRIFFEN-FOLEY

▲ Montage using detail, fig. 2, p. 24; *Australian comedy Duo Roy & HG*, 2016.

IMAGES: ABC AUSTRALIA; WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, CC-BY-SA 4.0; G. COSGROVE (LETTER)



▲ Fig 2. Ruth Cracknell and Gary McDonald in *Mother and Son*

IMAGE: ABC AUSTRALIA

size and geographical reach, and to gauge listener preferences.<sup>6</sup> Competitions run by commercial stations solicited volumes of ‘mail’ that managers could then boast of to station advertisers. ‘Letters, and letters alone’ were the test of the announcers’ popularity, contended a Sydney radio journalist in 1936: ‘no mail, no proof for manager and advertiser, no job.’<sup>7</sup>

When a sample of fan mail was brought to popular American philosopher Will Durant in the mid-1930s, he concluded that it was mostly written by the very young and the very old, the sick and the lonely, hero worshippers—and a ‘few from the average man or woman’. Psychology Professor Cyril Burt, consulting for the BBC, announced around this time that ‘an excessive proportion of the writers were obviously neurotic.’<sup>8</sup> Listeners wrote to broadcasters for a range of reasons, concluded a 1949 study of mail sent to the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra broadcast on CBS. These included the desire to make a comment about something related to a program, to express an emotional identification with a performer or show, or to register a vote of approval or criticism. Fan mail was a way in which listeners could ‘participate more fully in the experience of “listening”.’<sup>9</sup> Overlooking some of this work in 1950, sociologist Elihu Katz contended that fan mail was valuable if only because it expressed sentiments which were shared, although somewhat less volubly and by people who did not write in. He also restated that much of what was lumped together as ‘fan mail’ was solicited, while noting that the focus of these letters on given topics still made them valuable to radio and other researchers.<sup>10</sup>

The earliest industry or scholarly interest expressed in Australia’s radio fan mail was by W.A. McNair, director and research manager of the Australian office of American advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, in his pioneering 1937 book on Australian radio.<sup>11</sup> As television began being rolled out in Australia from 1956, viewers debated its merits. Susan Bye considered the public ‘duel-by-pen’ between fans of Melbourne entertainers Bert Newton (host of HSV7’s *The Late Show*) and Graham Kennedy (host of GTV9’s *In Melbourne Tonight*) in the late 1950s, focusing on letters published in broadcasting periodicals.<sup>12</sup> Michelle Arrow delved into some of the letters received by the ABC and writer Gwen Meredith over the decades *The Lawsons* (1944–49) and *Blue Hills* (1949–76) were heard across Australia.<sup>13</sup>

These studies of responses to particular Australian programs and presenters helped to inform the chapter on fan mail in my recent book surveying a century of radio and television listening in Australia.<sup>14</sup> In this article, I rummage through more boxes of letters received by Ruth Cracknell and Roy and HG in the 1980s and 1990s.

Cracknell had received letters from fans of her work on the stage, radio and screen since the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> Her turn in *Mother and Son* playing an older woman with memory loss tormenting her stay-at-home son, played by Garry McDonald, resulted in at least two boxes of letters now preserved in her collection at the National Library of Australia (NLA).<sup>16</sup> ABC colleague Phillip Adams—who has attracted dozens of boxes of mail from listeners, yet to be fully accessioned by the NLA or tackled by researchers—was moved to write to her during the second series:

Yes, it’s another fan letter. But if you keep tossing off these extraordinary performances, you’ll have to expect it. Garry’s Mum is a dazzling piece of work. It’s complex, contradictory and painfully, tragically funny.

Aware, perhaps more than most correspondents, of the amount of work that went on behind-the-scenes in television,

Adams also passed on his compliments to writer Geoffrey Atherden.<sup>17</sup>

When the unlikely hit was criticised by Sydney talkback host John Laws in *TV Week*, a Queensland nurse sat down to write to a ‘complete stranger’ to tell Cracknell she found her depiction ‘true to life’. Declaring herself ‘a 50 year old fan!’, Joan Kemp said that if Cracknell ever found herself in Townsville, she would like to serve the actor ‘a quiet cuppa in a sunny garden’, or take her out to ‘the best Restaurant in Town’. The nurse’s handwritten letter was tentatively addressed to the ABC (‘the Post Office are pretty good at finding people’).<sup>18</sup> She was not the only viewer who failed to automatically assume her letter should be sent to Cracknell via the ABC. One Victorian viewer wrote to Atherden and Cracknell (‘La Stupenda’) courtesy of a production she was in at the Sydney Opera House.<sup>19</sup> Dorothy Furhagen, who let it be known she had seen Cracknell in Sydney theatre productions and ‘in a great Italian Restaurant’, also hoped to share coffee or lunch with her. Describing herself as self-made, financially secure, and with two Arts degrees, Furhagen hoped to discuss the character of Maggie Bear—‘threatened with loneliness and abandonment...a reflection of the position and predicament of many middle class Australian women’—with the actor.<sup>20</sup>

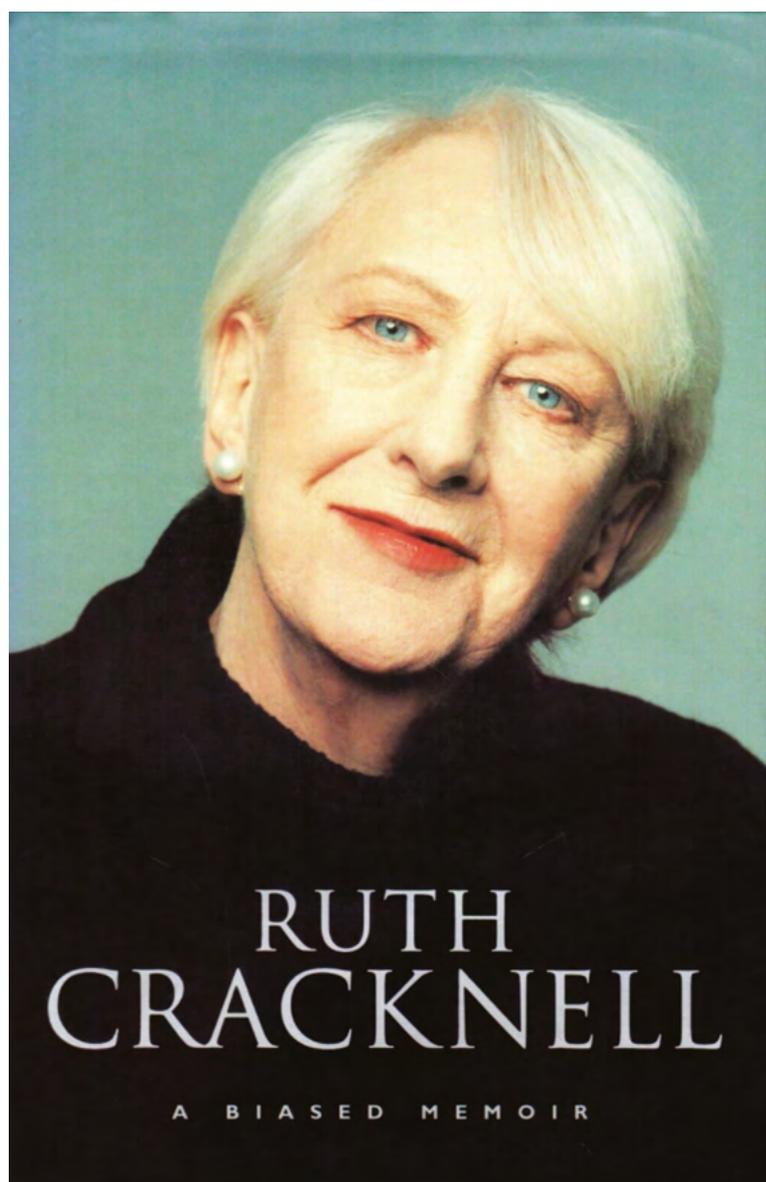
Primary school children adored Maggie Bear, observed Cracknell in *A Biased Memoir*: ‘They recognise the naughty child in her and anyway there’s something of Maggie in their grandmothers.’<sup>21</sup> Children wrote to Cracknell to request photographs, recount their favourite scenes, tell her about themselves and their families, and wonder whether she was acting when she forgot things. They begged for replies, along with new episodes or at least repeats.<sup>22</sup> Brisbane girl Rachel Wilkinson wrote simply: ‘I think you are excellent on Mother and Son but I couldn’t stand to have a mother like you.’ She also attached a certificate she had made ‘awarding’ the actor a Logie.<sup>23</sup> One boy, from a property in north-western New South Wales, struck up a regular correspondence with Cracknell, updating her on his activities,

apologising for silences, and asking ‘how’s showbiz?’<sup>24</sup>

Helen Nader, a ‘migrant Australian’ who struggled to enjoy some local shows, told Cracknell she just needed to hear the theme song of *Mother and Son* to start to laugh, and asked to be alerted if a fan club were formed.<sup>25</sup> Shirley Gross from southern Queensland remarked on the importance of Australian entertainment on ‘the Box’ due to financial constraints and ‘being away from it all’, with no live theatre. Echoing some other correspondents, she revealed she was a ‘Cracknell fan long before Maggie Bear!’, and also wondered if it was true that the actor was writing a book.<sup>26</sup> Some of the letters to Cracknell show how some Australians

▼ Fig 3. Cover of *Ruth Cracknell: A Biased Memoir*, Viking Australia, 1998.

IMAGE: PENGUIN BOOKS AUSTRALIA





▲ Fig 4. Comedy duo Roy and HG

IMAGE: WIKIPEDIA, CC-BY-SA 4.0

acquired (or sought to acquire) some of the 'things' that were designed to keep company with the immaterial core object, television (and radio) shows.<sup>27</sup>

On learning that Cracknell loved poetry, Val Chubb, a self-published poet from Armidale, despatched 'Ruthless', with stanzas such as:

Tonight I watched that show  
the one with—whatsername—,  
the one who's always cooking  
unexpected things that smoke and smell  
of rubber.<sup>28</sup>

Atherden recalls a viewer ringing the ABC and spending twenty minutes telling the Head of Publicity why she didn't like the program, criticising it for making a mockery of the aged. When the ABC manager ventured to suggest that perhaps she shouldn't watch *Mother and Son*, the woman retorted 'But I have to watch it, my mother loves it.'<sup>29</sup> A scene showing Maggie dropping oranges from her shopping bag into a freshly-dug grave was a particular favourite, even inspiring an independent artist to design a hoodie for sale online.<sup>30</sup>

*Mother and Son* turned the veteran actor into a household name. In her memoirs Cracknell wrote of the 'enormous mutual warmth' between her and the show's viewers. She

was grateful for the 'real joy' emanating from *Mother and Son*, in spite of her loss of privacy. She approached her role with a sense of responsibility, attending fundraiser luncheons for Alzheimer's research.<sup>31</sup> While Cracknell does not (understandably) seem to have taken up invitations to meals with viewers, she replied to their letters, assiduously ticking off each one.

The satirical program *This Sporting Life* (*TSL*, 1986–2008), presented by Roy and HG on the ABC's youth radio channel (then network), Triple J, attracted a huge amount of fan mail. The papers of Greig Pickhaver ('HG Nelson') are spread across three collections in the State Library of New South Wales (figs 1 and 1a). Several boxes contain bulging files of letters from listeners to *TSL* and viewers of the pair's later television endeavours. Correspondents included politicians, lawyers, accountants, scientists, waitresses, teachers, students, suburban football players, aspiring broadcasters, academics, and at least one pathologist and one marriage celebrant. The letters documented how audience members listened and watched: on the lounge, at work, on the train, on ships, and in pubs and prisons. Each letter seems to have yielded a response from the hard-working pair.

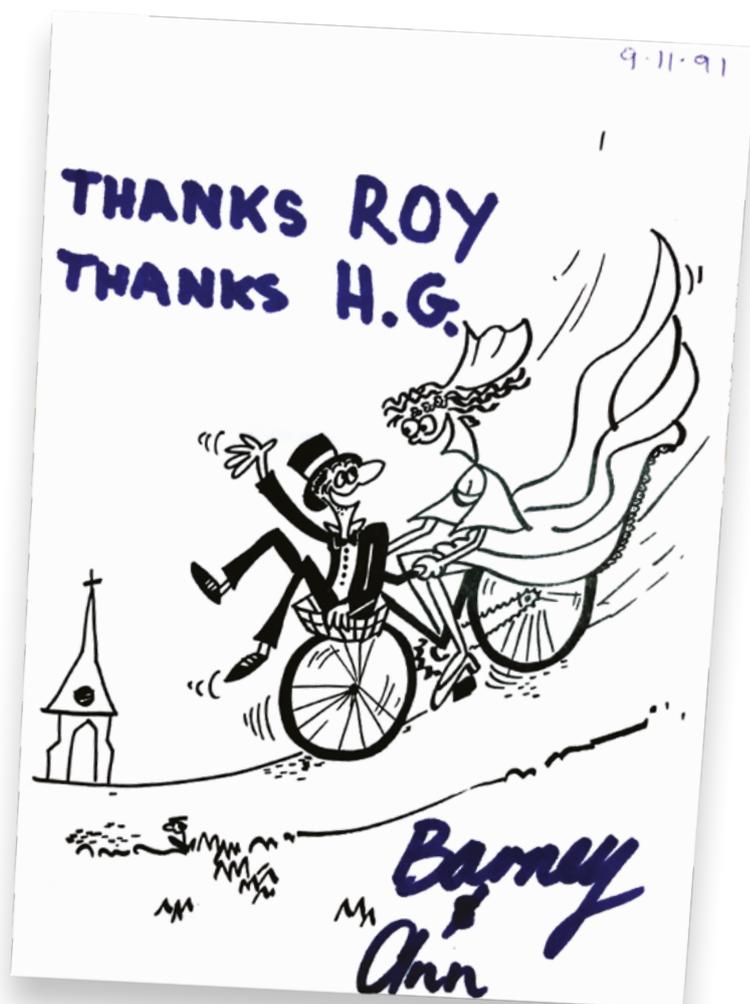
Correspondents wrote in with reports on their local football teams and clippings about local oddities, and requests for outside broadcasts from local grounds. They penned sample scripts and submitted artwork, from cartoons to designs for a new Australian flag (bearing a football), as well as slapstick entries to competitions. Some went to the trouble of naming their own teams, with John Howard and Joh Bjelke-Petersen part of a Rugby League side of 'political enigmas',<sup>32</sup> and 'Heaven and Hell' teams facing off in Australian Rules.<sup>33</sup> A CSIRO scientist, (later Professor) Mark Stacey, pitched the idea of an absurd new sport—Long-Distance Golf—to revolutionise the tourism industry.<sup>34</sup>

Listeners bought the book *Pants Off: This Sporting Life* (1989) and associated merchandise. One Coffs Harbour listener shared how he sat in front of the radio with his own pants off.<sup>35</sup>

Listeners christened the hosts with names such as 'Consorts of Footy Commentary' (not to mention 'living National Treasures').<sup>36</sup> Letters displayed a humorous and intimate knowledge of Roy and HG's comedy and lexicon. One listener went to the trouble of creating a legal letterhead for 'KAPIL, DEV, & BLUNDERBUSS', threatening defamation action on behalf of a client: 'we are threatening to sue your buns off.'<sup>37</sup> Dr Jo Pluske, a scholar of agriculture at the University of Western Australia who had solicited an on-air greeting for his wedding, helpfully alerted the pair to a journal article on the detrimental effects of polyester underpants.<sup>38</sup>

There were hundreds of requests for wedding messages and birthday greetings, some of which were met by Roy and HG. 'You made my day and that of my family' wrote one man after his fortieth birthday was recognised on-air.<sup>39</sup> Roy and HG's practice harked back to the birthday calls that had been a staple feature of Australian radio stations (especially commercial stations) until the 1950s.<sup>40</sup> A Sydney groom penned a letter of appreciation after a message from Roy and HG was played at his wedding, with his bride appending a note: 'You had our guests in hysterics. You certainly sounded as if you knew us well and for strangers you played a major part in our day.'<sup>41</sup>

*TSL* was used by at least one community college, in central western New South Wales, to engage some of its students. Teachers sent the pair a project on Rugby League by 18-year-old Rick, with whom they had been working for two years to improve his literacy and concentration.<sup>42</sup> School students who wrote in included a Year 12 boy with a tape of his own call on a football match between Sydney Catholic schools.<sup>43</sup> 'Skippy G', from an amateur high school radio station in Victor Harbor, asked for details on how his 'two Sporting Gods' got into broadcasting.<sup>44</sup> Others interested in working with Roy and HG were an Australian magazine columnist based in California,<sup>45</sup> and a young man desperate to move into radio or television who had studied some of their scripts provided by the Australian Writers' Guild.<sup>46</sup>



One Queensland asked the pair to extend their banter to cover women's Rugby League, and hoped that a women's State of Origin team might be formed.<sup>47</sup> She was attuned to the self-conscious blokeyness of the endeavour, where Roy and HG made the 'serious trivial and the trivial serious', and was no doubt aware of the attention they frequently gave to the inadequacy of women's toilets.<sup>48</sup> An anthropology student at the University of Adelaide sent in his major essay, entitled 'Blokes and Jokes', on the ambiguity of masculinity in *TSL*.<sup>49</sup>

There seems to have been little criticism, and along the lines of this in a Valentine's Day card: 'I find you two absolutely lewd, crude, & unrefined, disgusting at times, and *absolutely gorgeous*.'<sup>50</sup> In 1992 one Melbourne fan ('The Dobber') informed the hosts their act was being 'sabotaged' by a commercial FM station, with a character called 'Mick' who seemed to be based on HG Nelson.<sup>51</sup>

▲ Fig 5. Fan mail to HG Nelson

IMAGE: MLMSS 7035, GREIG PICKHAVER FURTHER PAPERS, 1988-1995, BOX 3, STATE LIBRARY OF NSW.

There were laments about no longer being able to listen when fans found themselves ‘marooned’ on the Great Barrier Reef or overseas.<sup>52</sup> Letters recounted playing with technology, by for example muting the television in order to hear Roy and HG’s call on Triple J.<sup>53</sup> One couple boasted of creating their own ‘simulcast’ by taping the first part of a commentary, then playing it back with the television on mute to avoid the ‘ramblings of Big Dazza’ (Darryl Eastlake) on Channel 9.<sup>54</sup> Roy and HG’s fans poked fun at the sometimes risible phraseology used by sporting commentators, as well as particular (usually commercial) callers. Lazza Murphy regretted being forced to listen to Ray Warren’s calls of Friday matches because Roy and HG broadcast on Saturdays,<sup>55</sup> and another audience member was similarly disparaging about Ray Hadley’s ‘Continuous Call’ on 2UE.<sup>56</sup>

The mail documents listeners following the pair to television, with a version of *TSL* shown on the ABC in 1993–94. Vicki Hibbert from Melbourne wrote of how she now looked forward to Monday nights, although her husband had nearly choked with laughter on several occasions at the pair’s terms for body parts.<sup>57</sup> ‘Anonymous Waitress’ from Melbourne, who worked at the MCG but was not a ‘sporting person’, found the television program intimate and unique. She described how the hosts ‘looked down the camera as though you’re [sic] in love with us’, and how her laughter sometimes caused her cat to jump off her lap. She dismissed the criticisms of some television commentators, quoting Bette Midler: ‘Fuck em if they can’t [sic] take a joke.’<sup>58</sup>

But some listeners struggled to adapt to television, including Brendan Boon, who described himself as a ‘radio man’. He wrote to Roy and HG from northern New South Wales to express regret that they seemed to be succumbing to the commercial pressures of television and ‘mass produced idiot humour’. Boon wanted *TSL* to continue on radio (which it did), summing it up as ‘a bastion of Australia, pure distilled Aussie grit, often obscure, often exciting and always genuine’, and comparing it with the BBC’s legendary program, *The Goon Show*.<sup>59</sup>

Canberra’s David Fredericks responded to complaints aired on the ABC’s own television show *Backchat* with an ode:

Yes they are funny, even anally so,  
That is what makes it such an original  
show.

...

So get off their backs and give them a go,  
And if you really can’t take it watch  
Channel 0.<sup>60</sup>

The occasional dissenter wrote directly to Roy and HG, including one viewer who complained that their ‘ocker image’ might embarrass Australia’s reputation overseas.<sup>61</sup>

Another viewer was motivated to enter a weekly competition in the hope of being able to strut around his coastal town wearing a Roy and HG hat or T-shirt: ‘Besides, they are TOO BLOODY EXPENSIVE TO BUY at my LOCAL ABC SHOP!’<sup>62</sup> Peter Williams from Lake Macquarie, who now found Friday nights on the ABC essential viewing, wrote a screed entitled ‘WHAT ROY AND HG MEAN TO ME’: ‘What superlatives could be adequate to satisfactorily describe the “Einsteinian” effect upon the western cultural tradition exerted by those two doyens of airwaves and screen.’<sup>63</sup> A Sydney correspondent penned an unflattering ode to ‘The Ubiquitous Kenny’, mocking the Nine Network sports anchor Ken Sutcliffe for covering everything from the Olympics to ‘Nepalese tiddlywinks’.<sup>64</sup>

*Club Buggery*, which mixed talk, sketch comedy and variety, followed on ABC television in 1995–97. One fan wrote of the Logie Award-winning program being the highlight of his week: ‘I have long since forgone the pleasures of a Saturday night out to ensure possession of the prime armchair come 9.30.’ After being sent tickets to be part of the studio audience, she dipped into her rent money to buy Nelson’s 1996 book, *Petrol, Bait, Ammo & Ice*.<sup>65</sup> Dallas Monger created a *Club Buggery* calendar (‘I like to think that I know your sense of humour’) and suggested the pair commission an ‘Official Club Buggery Web Site’.<sup>66</sup>

When another fan, who had ‘feigned headaches and funerals’ to avoid missing an episode, thought *Club Buggery* wasn’t coming

back, 'well the bottom dropped out of my life'. The South Australian woman had compiled seventeen hours of the radio program on tape, to which she listened to help her get through her job as a public servant.<sup>67</sup>

Other audience members pitched whole new programs to Roy and HG. Canberra's Robert Donovan proposed a spoof equine television drama with game show host Ian Turpie (a good-natured target of, and then participant in, the levity): 'As "Blue Hills" did it for the ABC in the past, "Turps About the Horse" will do it for Auntie [the ABC] again!'<sup>68</sup> An electricity blackout would lead to requests to 'Auntie' for repeats.<sup>69</sup> Some fathers were pressed into recording and mailing episodes of the pair's programs (for radio and television) to their expatriate sons.<sup>70</sup>

While the pair were seen on television, they continued to present *TSL* on Triple J until 2008. Sharon Nash credited the Saturday-afternoon broadcasts with helping her get through an eight-year slog to complete a Masters of Science, and included Roy and HG in her thesis acknowledgements.<sup>71</sup> Mick O'Callaghan taped *TSL* to listen to while harvesting on his parents' farm in Western Australia.<sup>72</sup> Peter Neilson, the 'mere fan' who listened to the show with his mates 'for a bit of music, to learn new words, to have a laugh and to get the footy updates', despatched a fax expressing his frustration with the two-hour time delay from Sydney and asking for *TSL* to be relayed live to Perth.<sup>73</sup>

Given the extraordinary popularity of the pair, it is perhaps no surprise that a portrait of them by Paul Newton won both the Packing Room Prize and the People's Choice Award when it was entered for the 2001 Archibald Prize.<sup>74</sup> Five years later, 21-year-old Stuart McMillen started a Wikipedia entry on an 'Australian cultural institution': Roy and HG's annual call of three State of Origin Rugby League matches. 'They were my favourite three nights of the year ... I would turn on the Channel 9 TV coverage of the football game, and mute the audio', McKinnon later recalled. He found the pair's call, in the language of club football dressing sheds, the perfect antidote to the 'self-important, overblown' and corporatised commentary of Nine's experts.<sup>75</sup>

In 2013, the introduction to *TSL* was one of ten sound recordings added to the National Film and Sound Archives' Sounds of Australia register of cultural significance.<sup>76</sup>

The letters inspired by *Mother and Son* and the programs of Roy and HG contain numerous reflections on other aspects of broadcasting, as well as Australian sport, culture, humour and life during the 1980s and 1990s. For this article, I have delved into the letters received and preserved by Ruth Cracknell and Greig Pickhaver, both of whom approached their fan mail with a considerable sense of responsibility. These letters reveal that it is much too simplistic to dismiss most authors of fan mail as, in Professor Burt's words, 'neurotic'. The ABC may have further letters to the broadcasters in its own archives. And hundreds—maybe even thousands—of letters that Cracknell and Roy and HG wrote in response to their listeners and viewers may lurk across Australia.

Following the fan mail trail has the capacity to expand and enhance our understanding of radio and television history, more probably in a qualitative than a quantitative sense. Searching out and recovering the writings of active consumers of Australian broadcasting (and responses to this writing) can shed light on why people listened or watched; what they consumed (given the fragmentary and piecemeal archival record of actual broadcast production); what people valued in programs and performers; how they responded to and used media technologies; and how they negotiated social, cultural and political issues. ¶



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18. NLA: MS 9848, Box 2, Folder 10, letter from Joan Kemp, 18 April 1985.
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34. SLNSW: MLMSS 7035, Greig Pickhaver Further Papers, 1988–1995, Box 3, letter from Mark Stacey, 9 June 1991.
35. SLNSW: MLMSS 7035, Box 3, letter from M.G. Drewsen, 21 June 1991.
36. SLNSW: MLMSS 7035, Box 3, letter from Joe Tooma, 9 May 1991.
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44. SLNSW: MLMSS 7035, Box 3, letter from 'Skippy G', 12 September 1991.
45. SLNSW: MLMSS 7094, Box 6, letter from Owen R. Jeffries, 29 September 1993.
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62. SLNSW: MLMSS 7094, Box 6, letter, 13 September 1993.
63. SLNSW: MLMSS 7094, Box 6, letter from Peter Williams, 31 July 1995.
64. SLNSW: MLMSS 7094, Box 6, letter from Ben Nicklin, 3 January 1995.
65. SLNSW: MLMSS 7632, Box 3, letter from Helen Robson, 28 August 1996.
66. SLNSW: MLMSS 7632, Box 4, letter from Dallas Monger, 25 January 1998.
67. SLNSW: MLMSS 7632, Box 4, letter from Irene Petrovs, n.d. (c. 1997–98). In 2016, another fan, 'Snotty', uploaded a video to YouTube boasting of the 36 hours of discs of Roy and HG he had recorded: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXAPL8\\_8NZk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXAPL8_8NZk)> [accessed 1 March 2021].
68. SLNSW: MLMSS 7632, Box 4, letter from Robert Donovan, 30 January 1997.
69. SLNSW: MLMSS 7094, Box 6, letter from John Butler, 22 March 1994.
70. SLNSW: MLMSS 7632, Box 3, letter from Archie Eckermann, 24 May 1996; Box 4, letter from Craig Moir, 28 April 1997. See also MLMSS 7035, Box 3, letter from Tim Murray, 31 April 1991.
71. SLNSW: MLMSS 7632, Box 3, letter from Sharon Nash, 26 August 1996.
72. SLNSW: MLMSS 7094, Box 6, letter from Mick O'Callaghan, 7 December 1993.
73. SLNSW: MLMSS 7632, Box 4, fax from Peter Neilson, 12 May 1998.
74. <<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/archibald/2001/17781/>> [accessed 1 March 2021].
75. Stuart McMillen, 'Roy and H.G.'s State of Origin Commentary', 2014, <<http://www.stuartmcmillen.com/blog/roy-hg-state-of-origin-commentary/>> [accessed 10 March 2020].
76. <<https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/sounds-australia-2013>> [accessed 10 March 2020].