



Photograph: Justine Walpole

AS AUSSIES LOSE THEIR LINGO IN THE AGE OF ALL-PERVASIVE AMERICAN SITCOMS, AUTHOR HUGH LUNN DECIDES TO GIVE HIS TWO BOBS' WORTH

The language of LUNN



PHIL BROWN

The fact that many Australians now talk like characters out of American sitcoms irks author Hugh Lunn. So much so that he decided to write a book as an antidote to the trend. "I wanted to record Australia's lost language before it was lost forever," says the 65-year-old Brisbane writer who has made a career out of living in the past.

"I've written about my life before but now I wanted to write about the words of my life." The result is *Lost for Words*, a compendium of Aussie lingo presented in the inimitable Lunn style folksy and personal, just the way his readers like it.

Hugh, you may recall, pre-empted the present memoir rush in Australian literature with his 1989 book *Over the Top with Jim*, now considered an Australian classic and a runaway bestseller with about 250,000 copies sold. (Hugh has also adapted it for the stage and radio.)

The new book had its roots back in 1988 when he was busily writing about growing up in Annerley. (Various publishers said a book about that would never sell but luckily the University of Queensland Press thought otherwise.)

"I realised that to recreate an era I had to recreate the language too and have the characters talking the way they talked then," Hugh says. "And that's how I got interested in our lost language."

Hugh took to collecting words and phrases that had gone out of common usage. His methodology wasn't exactly academic.

"I found this old school port on the side of the road one day and thought it might come in



War of words ... a young Hugh Lunn on assignment in West Papua above; with Bille Brown, above right, who directed the stage adaptation of Lunn's classic novel *Over the Top with Jim* for the 1996 Brisbane Festival, and; his latest book, *Lost For Word*, above left



handy," he recalls. "I took it home and started writing words and phrases down on bits of paper which I'd throw into this pot. Then one day over a year ago I realised it was full and that was a sort of signal. My agent asked me what book I would write next and I said I was ready to write one about Australia's lost language. She mentioned it to the boss of ABC Books, probably expecting a blank look but instead he reached into his desk, pulled out a calculator and made the offer of an advance there and then."

This was the green light for Hugh to start sorting through his bits of scrap paper, and the result is an entertaining look at the way we used to talk. Hugh puts the words and phrases into their context and recreates the 1940s, '50s and '60s as he does so.

Back then if you weren't listening properly, your mum might ask, "Are your ears on straight?"

Or if you didn't look so hot you might have appeared to have been "dragged through a bush backwards". If your petticoat showed someone would point out, "It's snowing down south."

Or a bloke might say that he felt left out "like a shag on a rock" or that someone, who wasn't pulling their weight at work "couldn't work in an iron lung." You get the picture.

Your parents and grandparents might have talked like this but in an age of corporate speak and TV talk, such colourful Australian vernacular is fast disappearing. The nostalgia factor is high in this book as it was in *Over the Top with Jim*, *Head Over Heels*, *More Over the Top with Jim* and *The Over the Top with Jim Album*.

Before these sentimental favourites, Hugh, a former foreign correspondent who worked for *The Australian* when he came home, had already gained a reputation with the unauthorised *Joh-*

The Life and Political Adventures of Johannes Bjelke-Petersen and *Vietnam: A Reporter's War*.

More recently he wrote *Working for Rupert* about his days in the employ of the man some refer to as the Sun King. His last book, *On the Road to Anywhere* was about writing and travelling Australia on the strength of *Over the Top with Jim*.

"That one sort of got under the radar and didn't do that well," he admits. "It was probably the title – my idea. Luckily I got a good title for my new book, thanks to my mother-in-law. I was trying to think of one when she looked up from her crossword one day and said, '*Lost For Words*'. "I said, 'that's it!' You're worth your weight in horse manure." Luckily she knew he meant that in the nicest possible way.

LOST FOR WORDS BY HUGH LUNN, ABC BOOKS, \$32.95.

LEARNING CURVE]

Young Hugh Lunn had an exciting career as a foreign correspondent, covering events such as the Vietnam War and the Act of Free Choice ("which was an act of no choice") in 1969 when West Papua was annexed by Indonesia.

When Reuters sent him to Saigon at age 25 he was nervous but excited.

"I learnt a lot in Vietnam," Hugh says. "When I was there I got to see some of the best correspondents in the world in action. A lot of them filed their stories through our office. We had these banks of teleprinters, and I'd sit there reading through their stories as they went out.

"I could see immediately why these writers were superior. They wrote honestly about what they saw and the way they described things impressed me.

"For example Jim Pringle, who was Reuters' top man there, wrote this wonderful story about this victory that the Americans had in the Mekong Delta. They flew the journalists down to show them the Vietcong bodies and everyone else wrote what was expected, that the Americans had killed all these Vietcong in one of the biggest battles ever, blah blah blah ... but Jim Pringle came back and wrote 'Vietcong child soldiers lay like broken dolls along the banks' and I thought, 'Yes, that's how you do it'.

"You have to get in there and describe it and be personal. Vietnam was where I learnt how the world works and how to inject yourself into the story sometimes because you're there and no one else is."