

EXTRA BOOKS

Chairman of the board speaks

Stoked!

Bob McTavish
(Hyams Publishing, \$32.90)
Reviewed by David Knox

THERE is a telling sentence in Bob McTavish's story when he describes a surfing session with Nat Young: "This guy is gunna take this design to places I can't go - I've gotta work with him on this."

McTavish is acknowledging that he, the genius designer and shaper, needed the genius surfer to maximise the potential of his revolutionary surfboards.

The small passage in this 422-page reminiscence pinpoints what many surfers of a certain age believed to be the case in that epoch of upheaval of modern surfing in the 1960s. McTavish made the bullets; Young, the powerful, aggressive "animal" surfer fired them.

Midget Farrelly, Young, McTavish and Simon Anderson are Australian surfers who have wielded a mighty influence on how waves are ridden across the world.

Farrelly was the country's first great surfer whose 1962 victory at Makaha, Hawaii, helped to trigger surfing's popularity explosion in Australia. He was a pioneer, an innovator, a perfectionist and one of the very few superstars.

Anderson developed the three-fin board, a design advance in 1981 that if it had been patented would have made Anderson a millionaire

many times over. He still makes boards for a living.

Then there were McTavish and Young and the "new era" of the mid-1960s. McTavish, as *Stoked!* illustrates, was an unusual man. He defied convention to indulge his obsession with riding waves. As he journeyed deeper into surfing he became fascinated with how a surfboard worked.

This son of a bank worker used his imagination, intelligence, self-taught craftsmanship and considerable surfing ability to transform surfboards from heavy cumbersome planks to highly responsive craft that could take surfers to new places on a wave.

And if that sounds esoteric, then reader beware.

McTavish, for all his homespun erudition, makes little compromise when he writes about surf, waves and surfboards though there is a glossary at the back of the book.

Enter Young, the supremely gifted and highly progressive

athlete. He still gets my nod as the greatest surfer, who showed the world a different, more challenging and exciting way to ride a wave.



Tubed ... Bob McTavish surfing near Byron Bay.
Photo: Colonel Folks

others. Foreword writer Tim Winton is among the adoring throng.

McTavish appears to condone petty theft, fails to pay his way, lets friends and employers down and flaunts his irresponsibility. He's a special freewheeling spirit; the rest are drones.

He can be self-deprecating (particularly about his lack of height) but never leaves the reader in any doubt about his importance in the surfing revolution. Though he lived for years on the breadline, he was never a bum. He always found work to eke out a living.

Stoked! is a free-

wheeling yarn, resplendent with improvised words, historical inconsistencies and 50-year-old conversations recalled verbatim. But maybe the disciplines of fact checking and editing are to McTavish what the ledger and the journal were to Banjo Paterson's Clancy.

This book is a long way short of a definitive, well-researched history of a surfing and the life of Bob McTavish. But it's an intriguing, personal reflection of a tumultuous era in surfing and Australia and of a young life daringly lived.

But never mind who's one, two, three or four. McTavish's tale is a compelling, expletive-free account of how surfing in the 1960s moved from longboards (mean dimensions nine feet, 11 kilograms) to today's shortboards (six feet, 1.8 kilograms).

At the forefront were McTavish and Young, with a sizeable contribution from their collaborator, the eccentric Californian George Greenough.

For many, particularly longboard gliders, the shift was emblematic of a broader philosophical change. Malibu riders were relaxed, cool,

stylish. Shortboarders were frenetic, competitive and ugly.

Stoked! gives wonderful insight into surfing in Australia in the 1960s. It's refreshing in that the story approaches the subject from a Queensland aspect as opposed to so many Sydney-centric histories.

McTavish the individualist takes pride in the fact he eschewed so-called normality to pursue his dream. But as he takes us through his adventures it becomes clear much of it was achieved by relying on the generosity and/or gullibility of

