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Back Home to Mum

The Australian Myth in England

IN 1884, a century after the first convict ships set sail for infant Sydney, there was founded, in London, *The Australia and New Zealand Weekly*. This journal now has a circulation of 70,000. Who reads it? The astonishing answer is, almost all of the 60,000 permanent Australian residents in this country, plus most of the 40,000 additional transient visitors who come here every summer.

That Australia is underpopulated is a commonplace: a mere nine millions live in a continent of three million square miles. Of these, no less than a million are "New Australians," one half of them British, whom Australia, in the past ten years, has begged and bribed, almost on bended knee, to exchange the North Star for the Southern Cross. Then who are these renegades who have taken ship and plane in the reverse direction? And why have they nestled so close to the old, cold bosom of the mother country?

The attitude of Australians to England is, though much less so than of yore, still hopelessly ambivalent. There is not one Australian who but firmly believes—and will be very ready to tell you so—that any Pommie bastard* is an inferior animal to a dinkum Aussie. The war in the Pacific has destroyed forever the cherished illusion that when danger looms, immediate and effective succour will be provided by the dear old imperial Mum. Australians no longer even

speak, as they used to (particularly in the sedate state of Victoria), of the British Isles as "home." And yet... and yet...

Of the nine countries of the Commonwealth outside the British Isles, I think only Australia (and New Zealand) still regard England, in spite of everything, as, in some sense or other, the "mother country." The four Asian members obviously do not—how could they? Or how could Ghana? And does anyone think Mr. Strydom does? As for Canada, they may do round about Toronto, but do they in Quebec or in the prairie provinces? No: it is only with the Antipodes that the cord umbilical is still not entirely severed.

Thus, while few Canadians feel they *must* visit England (but, almost certainly, that they ought to see the States), an enormous number of Australians still do. To put it at its most over-simplified, they feel they must prove something to that old cow, Mum. England is ancient, dirty, class-ridden, and too small to swing a snake, the beer is like horse's urine, and you can't get a good steak tea... But... Well, we might as well go and take a dekkc at the old place.

AND so they come: seven hundred a week by air, not to mention those whose worst fears are confirmed by the first, drab, dreadful, derelict glimpse of Tilbury docks. They save the money for the journey and, when they've spent it, get a job. But Cripes, pal, the wages here! How do these Pommies

* Pommie = Englishman; bastard = any male; almost an affectionate term.

manage? Son, this won't do!—so they look around for something better. And they very soon find it. Has anyone ever seen one of the 60,000 labouring on a building site?

The extraordinary art Australians have for rising to the top, or very near it, when they come to England, is perhaps to be explained, among other things, by those same secret, inner feelings of diffidence towards this country that first impelled them to come over here. By Gawd, I'll show them, they resolve—and, by Gawd, they plurry well do. Let me give one small example. A gifted young merchant seaman of nineteen years, called Tommy Hicks, wanders round Soho with his pockets full of empty, singing and playing the guitar. He goes into the 2 I's coffee bar, conducted by Mr. Paul Lincoln (from Australia), where he is “discovered” by Mr. John Kennedy (from New Zealand) who becomes his business manager, and is signed on for the Harold Fielding agency by Mr. Ian Bevan (from Australia). Before he can say “Bermondsey,” he is Tommy Steele, and rockets to stardom and a fortune with percentages all round. No doubt about it: the Aussies are the anglo-saxon Greeks.

In fact, the invasion of the whole English Variety world has been, in the past few years, sensational. Following in the pioneering footsteps of Miss Florrie Forde, Mr. Billy Williams (“The Man in the Velvet Suit”) and the evergreen Mr. Albert Whelan (all from Melbourne, Vic.), we have witnessed the satellitic rise of Joy Nichols, Dick Bentley, Shirley Abicair, Bill Kerr, and Kitty Bluett, to name but these. Dame Nellie Melba, in the world of serious music, was even more fertile a precursor. Australians may not be able to speak, but, my goodness, they can sing: for it would appear that if you project your speaking voice out of your larynx into your nose, as Aussies do, then, when you burst into song, the effect is as melodious as it was hideous before. Or is it, more simply, the buoyant ebullience of the Australian temperament that makes its children unafraid to sing? At all events, here are Sylvia Fisher, Joan Hammond, and Elsie Morison, John Brownlee, John Cameron, and

dear Peter Dawson to consolidate the conquests of Dame Nellie (or “Madame Melba,” as they call her in her native land). And on the concert platform, there sit Eileen Joyce, and till recently (alas!) Noël Mewton-Wood, while Sir William McKie thunders splendidly on his organ at the Abbey.

And not only music, though in that they've made a corner, like Neapolitans. In the theatre, Robert Helpmann acts where once he danced, Peter Finch makes films between his stage successes, and Ray Lawler writes the theatrical hit of 1957. Loudon Sainthill designs the sets, and so does Sidney Nolan, when he's not engaged in painting these enormous pictures from the Australian mythology without which no cultivated, wealthy, English household is now complete. Alan Moorehead, Russell Braddon, and Paul Brickhill scoop the journalistic pool. For fear of losing the battered reader's attention, I shall not go on to list the illustrious Australians who graze triumphantly in the English fields of scholarship (beviess of professors), diplomacy, the civil service (top echelons), architecture, engineering, and medicine (quite outstandingly). And sport, of course (jockeys and speedway riders—not only cricketers and tennis players). In fact, the only two professions in which I find Australians have *not* made so decisive a mark in England, are politics and the law: and perhaps that's rather to their credit.

IN the non-Marxist countries, there are only two areas of dense cultural concentration—Eastern America, and Western Europe; and those who have had the good fortune to live in either may easily forget the problem that besets artists born in a country of peripheral culture, like Ireland, say, or Australia, or Brazil. Almost inevitably, their artists must conquer a double world: the country of their own roots, and then, one or both of these two major concentrations of artistic activity. But this apparent disadvantage is a spur to greater effort: and it explains the fact that Australian artists are rarely provincial in their outlook—less so, in fact, than many an Eng-

lishman. They simply cannot afford to be; and for linguistic and economic reasons, the first target of their endeavours outside their native land will automatically be the British Isles.

What is the reaction of the natives to the return of the descendants of Ned Kelly and the Tolpuddle Martyrs? The answer, I think, is none whatever, for the simple reason that most Englishmen simply don't realise what has hit them. They still think it's the Scots who filch the best jobs, and haven't yet rumbled the Australians. One reason for this may be that the arch-egalitarian Aussies, unlike citizens of most Commonwealth countries, accept titles; and for an Englishman, anyone with a title is an Englishman. Thus their financial affairs have been managed by such distinguished figures as Lord Bruce (chairman of the Finance Corporation for Industry), Lord Baillieu (president of the F.B.I.—English, not American, version), both from Melbourne, and Sir Leslie Boyce (Lord Mayor of London), who hales from Taree, New South Wales.

And just like the Scots—or any minority conquering the majority from within—the Aussies in England have developed a formidable clan instinct for self-help and protection, as did, in Rome, the early Christians, or, under the Germans' noses, the French *maquis*. They forgather among the damp English alien corn at the *Surrey* in the Strand (where, believe it or not, you can buy canned Melbourne beer), at the *Down-under Club* in the Fulham Road (New Zealanders admitted, rather as overseas Scots might admit the Shetland Islanders), at the *King's Head* in Earls Court (God knows why they settle in *that* area, but they do), or at the *Boulevard* coffee-shop in Wigmore Street. They have their Societies of Australian Writers—and Painters—in England, dedicated to mutual aid and succour, which were founded and energetically sponsored by that prince of High Commissioners, the late Sir Thomas White. And let a play, or book, or exhibition, or musical performance by an Australian be in the offing, then the bush telegraph beats out its compulsive summons to a massive corroboree

of the Antipodean tribes, and the colony advance on a purposeful walkabout in the direction of the theatre, gallery, concert hall, or literary party.

BUT if the British are unaware of the fifth column in their midst, they are certainly more conscious than they used to be of Australia itself. I painfully recall, in the 1930's, when for a few intoxicating years I held an Australian passport, the languid disdain with which the Englishman regarded the distant continent. Donald Bradman was the only Australian they'd ever heard of... and wasn't he—excuse me, my dear chap—something of a—well—I mean, he liked *winning* when he played. And that *accent*, they said. That *Cockney* accent (which it isn't). No no, dear boy, no, no... no.

My oath, all that's altered now.... There exists a mysterious law, which someone should investigate one day, whereby countries, hitherto neglected and despised, become suddenly *fashionable*. Of recent years, for instance, just as Mexico was in the 1920's, so have Brazil and the Belgian Congo and Australia become modish in this sense, have suddenly become countries people are curious about, and want to be able to say they've been to. I think the last war began the cult of things Australian. There was a moment when Bob Menzies seemed the only Commonwealth statesman to compare with Winston Churchill. The diggers in Egypt and Malaya grew more flowers—if this were possible—on the laurels they'd won earlier at Gallipoli. And in the Pacific, Australia became, for a few years, the centre of the free world.... When the struggle was over, and we had those idiotic ration books, they deluged us with private and collective bounty. Then the half million young Britons set off to the promised land, and Australia became, almost overnight, a place desirable....

But perhaps, all unconsciously, it is the work of the expatriate artists which is also stoking the growing admiration for Australia. Since England heard Ray Lawler's *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, and saw the obsessive legends of Mrs. Fraser and Edward

Kelly portrayed by Sidney Nolan, it can no longer think of Australia as a country without its myths and mysteries. One sees thus that the Australians, like the Irish, can best create their national mythology abroad. The Irish dream was woven in London, in Paris, in Trieste, and in New York. Australians at home would never have believed in Roo and Ned, their symbolic heroes, until Lawler and Nolan had first persuaded old Mother England they were heroes too.

And so one also sees that grass-root Australian artists, who dig their toes firmly into the native mud, and dub the adventurous wanderers "expatriates" as if this were a nasty word, may have failed to realise altogether how and where the Australian legends can be born.

AND what will these legends be? In the first place, it is clear that, for creating them, Australian artists find themselves in an enviable tactical position: for their golden age, the age of the pioneers and virgin lands, is so very close to them in time. We, by comparison, are in a hopeless case, since our age of innocence is so remote, and any legends we may try to delve out of the past are merely "artistic" and archaic in the dread pre-Raphaelite manner; or else, if of contemporary figures, mannerist and unconvincing, as in the unfortunate example of T. E. Lawrence. Notice how the Americans, too, hit the target almost infallibly when they return to their own fairly recent wild west era, but quite fail to persuade us with Audie Murphy, let alone James Dean. It seems that the perfect period for the creation of a myth is when the first centenary of the heroes has not been celebrated yet: when the artists, as children, could speak to old men who, as young men, had seen the golden heroes in their living flesh.

And who will the heroes be?

We can find most of them in the pantheon with which Sidney Nolan has already made us so familiar. Edward "Ned" Kelly, who, as a boy of twenty-three, fought the whole government of the colony of Victoria with

all the "wild colonial boys" solidly behind him. The explorers who, almost within living memory, set off by camel or on foot across the second largest desert in the world. The men of the Eureka Stockade, whose rebel "flag of stars" is now consecrated in the national flag. The 150,000 men and women who were transported to keep the Old Country respectable. And, in more recent times, the airmen who really made the continent a nation, flying solo in crazy biplanes over shark-laden seas and hundreds of absolutely void square miles. And perhaps, one day, some Australian artist will even find, among the most wronged human creatures in the world—the authentic Old Australians—a hero of the stone-age who will shame our arrogance, and teach us ancient wisdoms.

The décor will be the wastes, the Bush, and the encircling seas, with drought and fire and perpetually burning sun. And the heroes' companions, the birds and beasts and reptiles and sea creatures—brolga, wombat, goanna, dugong—whose names betray the strangeness of their natures. And in these heroes, the complex, contradictory Australian character will be written large: the fanatical individualists who mistrust originality outside the herd; the beery boozier wedded to the censorious wowsler; the men who are cruel, incurious, vain, and flinty-hearted, brave, open-handed, humorous, and adventurous—born barrack-room lawyers with a profound contempt for fuss.

And why should it matter that Australian artists should create mythological heroes?

In the answer lies the final, the absolute triumph of the artist over those *practical* men who deride his activities as marginal. Without myths—without the symbols that enshrine its own highest conception of itself—no people can begin to exist at all. The myths once invented, they form, in turn, a people in their image—practical men and all. The artists create the myths, born of infant memories of outback heroes, but perhaps taking shape, over a pint of Carlton and United, in an English saloon bar beside the river Thames.

LETTER FROM MOSCOW

A Visit to Pasternak

IT WAS my first impression of Boris Pasternak, and I shall never forget it: a tall, grey-haired man stood at the open door of the house and waved me to come in, come in. He gesticulated with both hands and smiled at me as I walked up the snowy path through his garden. I do not know what kind of reception I had expected from him. But it is true I had not expected to find him at the front door, waving and smiling at me. I had thought to find an air of prudence, of reserve and distrust, and that indeed is what in some degree I did meet when talking to Pasternak's wife or his friends. But in the poet himself I found one of the freest human beings I have ever known, using the word not to denote external freedom but as the attribute of someone sovereign, confident, open, and true. In Boris Pasternak, for the first time, I met the other Russia—a country whose dimensions we do not know, more difficult of access than the Soviet Union itself.

Boris Pasternak, now sixty-seven years old, studied in Marburg and speaks German, English, and French fluently. (His father left Russia in 1921 and lived in Germany until Hitler came to power; he died as an emigré in England, where one of Pasternak's sisters lives, married to an Oxford professor of psychiatry.) In his little timber country cottage near Moscow, where I was visiting him, the poet is linked with the culture of the whole world. There is nothing provincial about him, and one does not get any impression of prolonged isolation.

Peredelkino, forty minutes' journey from Moscow, is a small village surrounded by hills and pine-woods where in the 'thirties the Soviet Writers' Union established a writers' colony of two-storeyed wooden houses, very much alike externally, set in large gardens. Of them all, Pasternak's house is perhaps the most simply equipped. It is quite unpretentiously furnished with the few pieces required for a house in the country. He has an apartment in town, but lives as much as possible in his *dacha*. I came from the keen winter cold into a warm kitchen.

Pasternak shook both my hands while I introduced myself in Russian. He smiled and said, "So you're a correspondent from West Germany?" He looked at me again and added in German, "*So jung und schon so verdorben!*" The joke seemed to please him; he repeated it later to his friends, and addressed me as "our friend, so young and so decadent" when, with a glass of vodka in his hand, he called a toast.

After this warm greeting, which lasted several minutes, I found myself upstairs in the poet's study. His wife, dark, plump, and inconspicuous, had led us into an almost empty room with large windows. There was a writing-table, a large wardrobe of light-coloured wood, a couple of chests and wooden chairs, a high desk and a dark, narrow bookcase. It contained a large Russian-English dictionary and a big Russian Bible; there were practically all Kafka's writings, in German, and Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, in French. "I haven't read Kafka yet, I've only just got him," Boris Pasternak said. "I'm just reading Marcel Proust. Very beautiful, at times very, very beautiful, but there's something missing in it. Well, we'll talk about that later."

And almost without transition he began an agitated monologue. It was the attempt of a poet to describe himself, to define his work. The names of Rilke, Thomas Mann, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, rose and disappeared in a whirlpool of comparisons. "The powers of Thomas Mann and Rilke combined in one person—that would produce a work of art," he said. In Thomas Mann there was too much the sense of an experimental psychological clinic, and he wrote too many essays for literary periodicals. But his art, combined with the delicacy and depth, the sense of the transcendent in Rilke's *Malte Laurids Brigge*—that would be something. And what a novel *Ulysses* would have been if it had retained the clarity of *Dubliners*! He himself was a modern, said Boris Pasternak, looking apologetically at the high desk which seemed to recall Goethe, but which he had only acquired recently