

Exile's Return: Change Was in the Air

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Leaving Australia

In September 1963 I boarded the ship, the *Fairsky*, in Port Melbourne, and waved goodbye to my parents and my girlfriend. I was 23 years old and leaving Australia for the first time. The *Fairsky* was one of many ships that had served in the Second World War and then been re-purposed in the immediate post-war years. In this case, she had served for both the USA and Royal navies, firstly as *USS Barnes* and then as *HMS Attacker*, before being converted initially for use as a cargo carrier (the *Castel Forte*), and eventually undergoing another major refit for passenger use in 1957, from which she re-emerged as *Fairsky*.

From 1958 until the mid-1970s *Fairsky* worked for Sitmar Line alongside her sister ships *Fairsea* and *Fairstar* on the 'migrant route' from Europe to Australia. Passenger numbers were underpinned by the Assisted Migration Scheme, under which the Australian government supported British adults to emigrate to Australia for ten pounds per head, and their children at no cost. Passengers on the return trips from Australia included many young people such as myself, setting out on an adventure to the 'Old World.'

As I boarded the *Fairsky* I had my cabin baggage, and a trunk in the hold. In the trunk was my copy of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* in two volumes. I reckoned I would need it because I was not continuing on the *Fairsky* to England, as my friends were. I was getting off at Naples and staying in Italy. Almost two years earlier I had graduated with Honours from the English Department at the University of Melbourne and was destined—so my teachers had decided—to go to Cambridge and, most likely, sit at the feet of Doctor F.R. Leavis in Downing College, as they had. I had other plans. I intended to become a poet.

Although I had studied English literature, I had become fascinated by the great artistic and intellectual achievements of the Italian Renaissance. Italy therefore was to be the destination that would enable me to break away from my academic study, and from my Australian provincial, even colonialist, background, to get a clean breath of air, and to see the world in a new light. And through a new language. If this makes me sound like Maurice Guest at the beginning of Henry Handel Richardson's great novel of that name, that is probably right. Maurice was escaping too, in his case from the confines and drabness of provincial England, to Leipzig, 'where the famous musicians of the past had found inspiration for their immortal works' (6). His ambition was to be like his precursors, a great artist. Mine was not all that different.

I was obviously one of those young Australians of the period who saw Australia as culturally stunted in comparison with those outstanding centres of great artistic achievement. To me—to us—in the early 1960s, Australia was still isolated from the rest of the world. There were movies, mainly from Hollywood; TV had finally arrived with the Melbourne Olympics in 1956; and the ABC brought us the world news, some of it in a forced accent that, to hear today, sounds weird and slightly embarrassing. Apparently, the news could only sound authoritative if it sounded a bit British. Similarly, if we were to develop our artistic ambitions, we had to go

elsewhere, where the accents were different. The *Oxford English Dictionary* in my trunk on the *Fairsky* made that clear. The dictionary would be handy because I was not going to the home of Eng Lit., and I was going for the long haul.

But the *Fairsky* took its time getting to Europe. After leaving Melbourne we paid a quick visit to Sydney, then crossed the Tasman to New Zealand. Then after less than 20 hours in Wellington we returned to Australia somewhere north of Brisbane and sailed—unimaginably today—between the mainland coast and the Great Barrier Reef to Cape York. My last sight of Australia was of it sinking quietly into a beautiful orange sunset. Coming on deck the next morning I found we were surrounded by smoking volcanoes as we approached Indonesia.

The first stop in Asia was Singapore, where a university friend showed me around, then Colombo, then Aden, where I was intrigued by the sight of goats standing on top of parked cars in the moonlight. At Suez my friends and I took a bus to the pyramids, which we climbed, before re-boarding at Port Said. I finally said goodbye to my friends at Naples, and found my way by train, via Rome, to Florence, where I was planning to confront my destiny. I collected my trunk several weeks later from the railway station, where an English-speaking porter, who was actually Irish as it turned out, helped me with the formalities.

Apart from the detour to Wellington there was nothing unusual about the *Fairsky*'s itinerary. Almost four weeks at sea gave us a sense of the immense distance separating Australia from Europe and just a glimmer of what my ancestors had endured as they sailed out from Scotland in the mid-nineteenth century. We were also given tantalising tastes of complex, rich and ancient cultures so very different from our own yet, in those days, although tainted by colonialism, still so far out of reach. Today we can visit them, as tourists, at will. Indeed, we can also fly over them all in less than 24 hours, filling the spare time with a couple of movies, several meals and a bit of a snooze.

The arrival

About eighteen months after I waved goodbye to my girlfriend at Port Melbourne, she joined me in Italy. (We were later married on the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome, but we have now been divorced for many years.) She had not come by boat, as I had. She had flown. While my trip on the *Fairsky* to Naples had taken nearly four weeks, hers to Rome, in the newly introduced Boeing 707, had taken less than 30 hours. A total revolution in Australia's relation to the world had taken place between when I sailed out of Port Melbourne and when she joined me less than two years later.

Before discussing the consequences of this transformation of international travel for Australian cultural life, a few statistics are relevant.

The first commercial passenger air journey linking Australia and Britain began in 1935. In Glenda Adams's *Dancing on Coral* (1987), Henry Watters likes to reel off the stops along the way:

Sydney, Brisbane, Gladstone, Townsville, Karumba, Groot Island, Darwin, Kupang, Bima, Surabaya, Batavia, Klabat Bay, Singapore, Penang, Bangkok, Rangoon, Akyab, Calcutta, Allahabad, Gwalior, Karachi, Gwadar, Dubai, Bahrain, Basra, Tiberias, Athens, Brindisi, Rome, Marseilles, Macon, Southampton, London. (18)

The journey took 12 days.

In 1954 the first Tourist (as distinct from First Class) airfare was introduced. The journey took, by this time, between two and three days. Certainly by 1956 the air journey from Sydney to London had shrunk to just a little over two days, compared to boat travel which took much longer, about four weeks, although it was cheaper.

Then on 27 October 1959, the *City of Perth*, Qantas Airlines' first Boeing jet passenger plane, reached London from Sydney in 34 hours, and within three years the time had been cut to 30 hours. Late in 1971 the introduction of Boeing 747s (Jumbos), increased the number of passengers per flight and cut the time to 25 hours. In February 2018 Qantas commenced a Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner service non-stop from Perth to London, a flight time of 17 hours. Plans are currently afoot to provide a non-stop service from Australian east coast cities by 2022, with a flight time of approximately 20 hours. In contrast, by the 1980s ocean travel, except for recreational cruises, had become a thing of the past, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) ceased keeping records of passenger numbers. Sadly, the *Fairsky* had taken its final voyage in 1980, when it was routed to Hong Kong for demolition.

This snapshot of the drastic reduction in the time required to travel from Australia to Europe is of course only part of the picture. One also needs to take account of the even more dramatic reduction in cost. In 1954 the average annual income in Australia was £1,508. At £537, the cheapest Return Tourist airfare represented 35.6% of that average income, a price that was obviously out of reach of most young Australians, many of whom earned less than the average income. The one-way airfare was 19.8% of the average annual income. Boat fares were far cheaper, one way amounting to 12.6% of average annual income, but then one lost about four weeks of one's earning time, just by being on the boat and drinking too much beer, which had to be paid for. (I used to fantasise that one day it would be possible to *drive* to Europe over a highway made up of the empty beer cans tossed overboard!)

The contrast with today's figures could hardly be more striking. According to recent ABS figures (6302.0, 21/02/2019), the average annual full-time income in Australia is \$86,632. The cheapest return airfare to the UK I could find recently (June 2019) was on China Eastern Air at \$1,007, which is 1.16% of that. A Qantas flight, taking just under 24 hours to London and 22 back (from the Australian east coast), cost \$1,333, or 1.54% of average annual income. Not only has access to the rest of the world become easier and faster; it has become radically more affordable. It is also worth noting that, as a result of the government's policy of 'stopping the boats,' in 2017-18, 27,931 asylum seekers arrived in Australia by plane, compared with boat arrivals which peaked in 2012-13 at 18,365 (Hutchens and Martin).

The consequence of this affordability for Australians' mobility is made clear by figures from the ABS. In 1960, 31,822 passengers travelled to the UK by sea, 5,422 by air. 'In the year ended June 2015,' (the latest reliable figures I could obtain), and I quote the ABS here:

there were 33.9 million crossings of Australia's international borders . . . This represents 1.4 crossings per person in the Australian population. Ten years ago (2004-05) there were 20.7 million crossings, representing 1.0 crossing per person in the Australian population. The majority of movements in 2014-15 were short term (96.8%).

And:

5,700 Australian residents intended to depart *permanently* during June 2015—but the majority return within the following year. In calendar 2011, 82,240 stated they were departing permanently, but only 15,890 spent more than 12 months or more overseas.

Of course, the Australian population is much larger now than it was 60 years ago, but still the figures speak for themselves. Australians are internationally mobile, and to leave Australia is not to go into a permanent exile, because the means and the capacity to return are readily available.

Why did people go into ‘exile’?

Malcolm Cowley’s illuminating book *Exile’s Return* points out a variety of reasons behind that famous ‘lost generation’ of American writers who flooded to Europe after the First World War, some of which apply also to Australians. George Johnson, in *My Brother Jack* (1964) describes the main impetus as a response to what he saw as the ‘intractable grimness’ of the ‘vast dry heart of the land’ (286). It was not unusual for young ambitious and artistically inclined Australians of Johnston’s generation to see Australia as something of a cultural desert. The idea of a ‘cultural cringe’ was then current. As the titular character exclaims in David Malouf’s *Johnno* (1975), ‘I’m going to shit this bitch of a country right out of my system . . . There’ll be nothing left in me of bloody Australia’ (98).

Cowley characterises the American ‘lost generation’ as having been ‘exiles at home,’ because the excellence of their Ivy League education had ignored their domestic social and cultural realities. That was certainly similar to my own Australian experience. At the University of Melbourne I had studied *Sir Gawain*, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, the Elizabethans, Dryden, Pope and the Romantics, but nothing more recent and geographically contiguous than T.S. Eliot. And no Australian literature. I have since been extremely grateful for this broad knowledge, but as a 23-year-old I wanted, in the words of Milton’s Lycidas, to explore ‘fresh fields and pastures new.’ The great achievements of the past that our education had taught us to admire were a spur to our ambition, but Australia was not where they had originated. We had to go elsewhere to be exposed to the landscapes and places of our literary imaginations.

David Malouf pointed out to me in private conversation that in his view, there was a great deal of cultural life in Australia in the 1940s and 50s, partly the result of European artists trapped in the country by the outbreak of war, the Vienna Boys Choir and the conductor Henry Kripps among them. The Ballet Russe toured just before the outbreak of war and some members stayed in Australia, thereby helping the foundation of the Borovansky Ballet. And due to the time it took visiting artists to travel to Australia, and the cost involved, once here many stayed a long time and toured extensively. Some of the international musicians in this category mentioned by Malouf included German conductor Otto Klemperer; British conductor and cellist Sir John Barbirolli; German opera singer Elisabeth Schwarzkopf; French-born German composer and pianist Walter Gieseking; Polish born American violinist Isaac Stern; and American violinist and conductor Yehudi Menuhin. But there was also considerable movement in the other direction—musicians, artists and writers who believed that Australia continued to be a cultural backwater and who set out determined to build a career overseas. As Leo Schofield wrote recently in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, ‘I was one of that generation of culture-starved young who fled to London,’ and there were many like him. Why did we consider ourselves to be

culture-starved, when evidence indicates that to the contrary there was quite a bit ‘going on’ in Australia?

I think the answer is that at that time we saw Australia as being on the receiving end of cultural activity. All this culture had been, or was being, created elsewhere, and due to the absence of a vibrant local publishing industry until the 1960s and ’70s, even Australian fiction was being created, or at least published, elsewhere. This was one of the consequences of Australia’s colonial past. But just as importantly I would argue that it was also a product not only of Australia’s relatively small population but, even more so, of Australia’s isolation from ‘where it was all happening.’

And this is where the change in the duration and cost of travel made the crucial difference. Malouf says that when he taught in Birkenhead in the UK he could not afford to come back to Australia. Today artists, writers, academics, scientists—anyone—can experience at first hand the cultural and intellectual richness available in other countries and bring their experience, knowledge, maturity and expertise back to Australia, in the process stimulating and enriching local creativity. Betty Burstall’s creation of the radical theatre La Mama, in Carlton in 1967, came after her year in the USA with her husband, film director Tim Burstall, and is an early example of what is now a commonplace of Australian cultural life. The establishment of Friendly Street poetry collective in Adelaide in 1975 is another such example, being established by three poets who had recently returned from the USA. And not only do Australians bring back their creativity, they export it as well. Groups such as the Australian Chamber Orchestra and the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra are highly regarded in Europe, Australian dance and theatre groups regularly perform overseas, and Australian writers are read and win prizes abroad, though not as much perhaps as we would like.

Conclusion

A number of Australian writers—to focus just on writers by way of conclusion—have chosen to be based overseas: Randolph Stow, Peter Porter, Shirley Hazzard, Clive James, Peter Carey and, for a time, Germaine Greer and Glenda Adams, to name a few of the more recent and high-profile examples. But they did, or do this, like scientists and academics, often for career reasons, not because they cannot afford the time or money to get back. (And of course, with the development of the internet, expatriates’ relations with their countries of origin can be totally dissimilar today from what they would have been even thirty years ago. But that is another topic of its own.) As a consequence of all these changes, we are unlikely to see any more great Australian novels of exile, such as *Maurice Guest* (1908); *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1919–29); *For Love Alone* (1944); *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969), and *An Imaginary Life* (1978). The ironic comedy of Adams’s *Dancing on Coral*, one could say, marks the transition to Australia’s new relationship with the world. The protagonist, Lark, like Adams herself, moves to the USA, not to Europe. And it is worth noting that some larks are migratory, and return to their homeland, as Adams herself did. And as I did too, rather than following Maurice Guest’s example and shooting myself in the snow-filled woods of Europe.

It turns out that I, like so many of my contemporaries, came at a pivotal point. In 1963, to leave Australia by boat was a commitment to a possible exile. My plan had been to spend at least six years ‘overseas,’ even longer should it be needed to scrape together the money to pay my fare back home. And it is impossible to estimate how much I learned and profited by spending my two years in Italy, one year in Florence and the second in Rome. I will never regret not going to Cambridge as was expected of me, and instead being free to walk in and out of the Uffizi,

the Bargello, the Pitti and the Accademia and the wonderful museums and churches of Rome, whenever and as often as I wanted, at no charge. I was also blessed to be able to attend brilliant productions of *Tristan and Isolde* and *Wozzeck* during Florence's Maggio Musicale, and other operas in Rome. So when I was unexpectedly offered the position of Lockie Fellow in Australian Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne in 1965 I thought long and agonisingly before accepting. But the reality was that within two years of my arrival I no longer needed to say a long goodbye to Australia, to launch out into the wider world on a one-way ticket. With the advent of the new form of long distance travel the world had become not only smaller, but also more accessible, and therefore my life immeasurably richer. It has made it possible for me now to live four or five months every year in Europe, while still feeling indelibly Australian. That is an incalculable gain. But sadly it needs also to be acknowledged that today's mass tourism is also threatening the character and even the architectural integrity of such places as Venice and Mykonos, as it both swamps and erodes the variety and cultural richness that once beckoned us from our antipodean shores. And how ironic that so much of it is once again carried by boat.

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