

## Australia in the Salman Rushdie Archive

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The Salman Rushdie archive (print as well as digital) was purchased by Emory University in October 2006 for an undisclosed sum. Rushdie himself is on record as saying, 'I don't see why I should give them away . . . It seemed to me quite reasonable that one should be paid' (*The Sunday Times*). When the archive was officially installed on Thursday 25 February 2010, Rushdie reflected briefly on the relationship between an author and his archive. Rushdie declared at the outset that he was never archive-minded; his working papers and peripheral material indiscriminately and as if through force of habit were thrown into boxes without any real desire to return to them. To Rushdie an archive tells a reader what a writer did 'on the way to other work . . . a means of getting from here to there.' In lectures and talks at Emory University (2007–2011) Rushdie has confessed: 'To me the book at the end' is the important thing; 'the process is not very interesting.' To scholars entering an archive, the opposite is the case. The archive which was opened for public use on 26 February 2010, that is, a day after installation, is housed on the tenth floor in the Manuscript Archives, and Rare Book Library (MARBL) of the University's Robert W. Woodruff Library. In MARBL the 'Salman Rushdie papers 1947–2008' carry the Arabian Nights (minus one)-inspired millenarian manuscript collection number of 1000. The hardcopies are described as '102.25 linear ft. (215 boxes) and 55 oversized papers (OP)' and the overall archive is divided into 11 with, where required, subseries within each series.

These past four years I have read the entire archive, print as well as digital, including the unpublished novels, variant texts, and everything available to a reader. There are private papers which are currently under an embargo and I am not sure when these will be made available. In making notes, most scholars would not have paid attention to the references Rushdie makes to Australia. I did because of my own one-time interest in Australian literature and culture. And so I carefully noted all references to Australia in the archive. What follows is a kind of narrative reconstruction through fragments with additional references to Rushdie's own autobiography in the third person, published in 2012, but on which he worked only after the archive had been properly catalogued.

On Valentine's Day 1989, Salman Rushdie's world collapsed. It was a world he had carefully nurtured and it was a world which celebrated the migrant, the newcomer, the hybrid, anyone who could bring newness into this world. He had spoken often about English as a world language and took pride in noting that the greatest novelist of the eighteenth century was an Irishman (he whose *Tristram* doesn't quite know when he should declare his birth), of the nineteenth an American whose American sublime was a tragic whale, of the twentieth another Irishman whose Dublin-wanderer ate with 'relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls' (box 45, folder 8). For someone who celebrated a universal English, and had given postcolonial theory 'the Empire writes back' mantra (*The Times*), Australia captured his imagination and he writes about his regret at not being able to write anything of substance about the country. On that Valentine's Day, Ayatollah Khomeini sentenced this apostate to death and Rushdie became a fugitive, not

from common law but from a religion which had been turned into an absolute and non-negotiable belief, one in which death was a punishment endorsed by God himself. On that Valentine's Day, Rushdie was scheduled to attend the memorial service for his friend Bruce Chatwin (13 May 1940–18 January 1989), which he did against the advice of many of his friends and of the secret service too. Bruce was one of the early casualties of AIDS and a well-known novelist and travel writer, albeit with a streak of compulsion to pepper history with large swathes of fiction. Rushdie and Chatwin were friends. It was Chatwin who it seems in Sydney had drawn Rushdie's attention to an advertisement for a gay play: 'Your last chance to see what heterosexuality was all about. Or your first' (Redacted Archive 09–75).

In the archive there is a fragment entitled 'Bruce Chatwin A Dreaming Track' where we read, 'In March 1984, Bruce Chatwin and I flew from Adelaide, where we had been attending the Writers' Week of the Adelaide Festival, into the heart of Australia, which is known as the "Red Centre" to those who live there and as the "Dead Centre" to those who don't' (box 48, folder 12). At the 'Red Centre' of Australia he climbed up Ayers Rock (for that was then the name of Uluru), was reminded of the tale of the so-called 'dingo baby' (Meryl Streep had made it an international cause célèbre in *Evil Angels*), and in a fleapit of a motel was told the story of the already-drunk Douglas Crabbe, the 36-year-old long-distance truckie who, refused a drink at the Motel, drove his truck into the bar, killing five people. In his defence, Crabbe said that the action was totally out of character as he loved his truck as if it were his own (children). Five years on, with the fatwa in place, Rushdie remembers this anecdote and wonders if people were willing to execute a writer because they loved their truck (their reading of blasphemy) more than human life. Looking back, he thought climbing up the sacred Uluru was also blasphemy. Mercifully, by the time he writes, climbers were no longer permitted to ascend the massive rock. These notes led to two essays published in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991). The first was 'At the Adelaide Festival [March 1984]' to which Rushdie as well as Angela Carter and Bruce Chatwin had been invited. In the essay he wrote not only about impressive writers ('Australian literature seemed to be in extremely good shape') but also about Adelaide as 'the ideal setting for a Stephen King novel, or horror film.' The second was 'Travelling with Bruce Chatwin,' memories of his travels into the dead centre of Australia (Rushdie, *Homelands* 226–27). The account of the truckie Douglas Crabbe, to which he returns often enough in his notes on Australia, is narrated more fully here. Such was the impression Crabbe's action had made on Rushdie that an even fuller account made its way into his published memoir, *Joseph Anton* (7–8), an account which is followed by the following note: 'It was on the flight home from that Australian journey in 1984 that he had begun to understand how to write *The Satanic Verses*' (*Joseph Anton* 8).

I am not suggesting that Rushdie's Australian experience, brief as it was, was the genesis of his remarkable novel, although thinking about it, Rushdie is aware of the connection between Crabbe and Khomeini, both of whom loved a commodity—a truck, a faith—more than human life. More to the point is the note about his Ayers Rock/Uluru experience (there are photos of Uluru, a stray dingo, and related photos in the archive, in box 167, folder 9) which too would now be impossible to re-enact. And it seems that the sacralisation of Uluru sits a little uncomfortably with Rushdie's own idea of what should be forbidden. Beyond this, one can suggest something else, and this is the experience of the Australian landscape, which an earlier story teller, one Henry Lawson, had seen as dreary emptiness, 'nothing but bush all around' he had noted. There is strong evidence in the archive of an essay on Australia which Rushdie had intended to write. In Box 49, folder 51 there is a 2 page manuscript titled 'Notes Towards an essay on

Australia.’ It seems Rushdie had a longer project on Australia in mind, quite possibly along the lines of pioneering critics of settler history such as C.D. Rowley and Henry Reynolds. In these notes Rushdie observes that there are ‘two quite different Australias, and they are in conflict, and even afraid of one another.’ One of these Australias is white, western and city-oriented (‘Sydney, one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and also one of the liveliest,’ he notes), the other Australia is ‘the Centre, the desert: an ancient, Aboriginal Australia.’ And it is this Centre which attracts him and which he wishes to write about: its ‘Aboriginal culture and mythology ... Dreamtime, dreamings, snake ancestors, emu ancestors’ about which urban ‘Western’ Australians seem uninterested and even ‘afraid of black Australia.’ I give the rest of the notes below, with ellipses where appropriate.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the painter Frederick McCubbin painted a series of canvases that have become part of white Australia’s self-myth. These are all portraits of the ‘lost child’ . . . always white, Victorian figure . . . alone in the terrifying alien wilderness . . . English child alone in the wilderness. The ‘lost child’ [footnote in red ink: ‘dingo case’ the wilderness stood accused of actually having stolen a child’]  
The truck driver who smashed his truck into an outback bar after he’d been thrown out, killing 4 [sic] people and maiming 16 . . .

Thankfully for the world, only Australia has spinifex grass which is something like a vegetal hedgehog, only twice as sharp.

So I wanted to write about the two Australias . . . war between men & women in cities . . . beatings inflicted by both whites and blacks on women, and the huge booze problem.

Fear, I was told, is also the defining element in the relationship between Australian men and women. ‘The men are afraid of the women, so they drink, and then the women become afraid of the men.’

Any of this, all of this. It could be quite a long piece. As Ned Kelly said, his last words before they hanged him: ‘Such is life.’

These notes re-appear as notes towards a novel (Rushdie may have wished to emulate D.H. Lawrence, who also visited Australia, and whom he remembers in his *Memoir* as he drives past Thirroul, Wollongong, where the great novelist wrote *Kangaroo* (Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* 474) as he turns again to the Aboriginal ‘Centre’ of Australia, its mythology, its culture, its dreaming, ancestor worship, the snake totem, how ‘Australian magicians’ (and here I suspect he means Australian Aboriginal magicians) ‘feel that at initiation a spirit has taken away their internal organs and replaced them with fresh ones’ (box 212, folder 8, 09–153 redacted). Against this there is white Australia and he writes again about Frederick McCubbin’s paintings, especially the lost child and how he feels that he reads Australia through McCubbin. About McCubbin we read yet again:

My perception of Australia through McCubbin. The peripheral (white) culture and the (aboriginal) land. Migration. The central character—maybe a woman—has lost a child (miscarriage). Others she meets have lost children (disappeared or estranged)

or just grown or gone away). A novel about the pain of separation. And I, too, exiled from home by time and change and a thickening of the tongue, am a lost child. (Box 212, folder 9 (10–20))

In the short story ‘At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers’ ‘home’ itself is rendered as a ‘scattered, damaged, various concept’ which leads to a return to an image of McCubbin’s lost child. ‘Children from nineteenth-century Australian paintings are here,’ we read in this short story, ‘whining from their ornate, gilded frames about being lost in the immensity of the Outback’ (Rushdie *East, West* 93–94). In box 50, folder 33 there is yet another fragment (3 pp), this time titled ‘To the Inland Motel’ which carries the subtitle, ‘An Account of his journey to Australia.’ I quote this fragment below as it too may be of some value to a future researcher:

The finke [a floodway rather than a river] was ‘up.’ No roo bar on the Toyota . . . as the Avis man said about having roo bars ‘no wuckens.’ ‘No wuckens, mate, it’s—fuck in the hand. No wucken furries.’ Meaning, no fucken worries.

Azaria Chamberlain jokes. ‘What’s a baby in a pram next to a dingo?’—‘Meals on wheels.’ . . .

Bruce Chatwin: ‘The point about Azaria Chamberlain,’ is that it represents a re-emergence of the most important of all white myths, the myth of the Lost Child . . .’

. . . the sight of the most astonishing—because least marked by man—landscape I’d ever laid eyes on was accompanied by the sound of the most erudite streams of consciousness on earth. I found myself in a kind of ecstasy, a state in which experience became so intense that it felt like exaltation. It was a time in my life when I badly needed something restorative to happen, and Bruce and Australia turned out to be it. Ever since our days in Toyota’s Answer [to the little Subaru], I’ve been trying without success to write about Australia. I should have known that the only way to do it was to write about Bruce as well.

Additional notes are found in Box 45, folder 11. Here there is a torn grey sheet on which is written, ‘Picnic at hanging rock; walkabout; the Azaria Chamberlain case; the paintings of McCubbin; the repeated image of the lost child.’ And later in box 22, folder 7 we get a line ‘the painful but deep connection to Australia’ as part of a section dealing with ‘things that have real importance for me. A novel about the pain of the generations.’ Migration, Dreamtime, the lost child, prophets from deserts (though it seems he had not read A.D. Hope), these themes also recur in *The Satanic Verses*. Thinking about the latter novel he wants to insert his ‘vendor of skins’ idea and adds that in this strange tale he should try out ‘something like the [life of] the Indian tinker, Mohan Singh, in Western Australia, near John Thomson’s farm’ (box 22, folder 7). He writes a line from *Voss*: ‘The gifts of destiny cannot be returned’ (box 212, folder 8 redacted copies from 1984–1985 entries: 09–166). During this trip to Australia, Rushdie had read Patrick White’s ‘dark Australian myths’ and in box 63, folder 42 he writes about the manner in which *Voss* ‘performs movements of breath-taking beauty.’ Continues Rushdie, ‘After reading his great novel *Voss* I wrote him (Patrick White) a fan letter and he replied with characteristic gruffness, “*Voss* is a novel I have come to hate.”’ With Bruce Chatwin, Rushdie had gone into the Australian desert, which would have reminded him of another desert from which, some 1400 years before and in historical time, a prophet had come bearing a revamped version of the stories

of Abraham and Moses. In this desert, in 1984, he also heard about a woman. Her name was Robyn Davidson.

In *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie narrates how in an Alice Springs bookshop he chanced upon Robyn Davidson's *Tracks*, 'an account of her solo trek across the Gibson Desert accompanied by camels' (Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* 67). Through Chatwin, who apparently carried everyone's phone numbers and, it is suggested, possibly the unlisted personal line of the Queen of England herself, Rushdie meets Robyn and they hit it off splendidly during the first half of their tempestuous three-year affair. Robyn takes Rushdie out into the Australian outback and it is with her that he experiences life in the wilderness, like Moses or Mohammad, sleeping under the stars, experiencing Dreamtime, and of course understanding the incestuous ways of camels, one of whom is named 'Selman the Camel' (Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* 67), an aggrieved dromedary who should have been named something else. Later, in Davidson's novel *Ancestors*, an unpleasant American character is modeled a little on Rushdie. She also recalled in an interview that Rushdie's library was full of Science Fiction, a genre that he greatly admired.

He returns to the genesis of *The Satanic Verses* in *Joseph Anton* (69–75) and again connects it with his Australian outback experience with Robyn Davidson. 'With his emotions running high after his first few overwhelming days with Robyn' as if to control himself (that is his emotions, which must have been strong as later his second wife Marianne Wiggins discovered a note Salman had left for Robyn, a line from the Beatles song, *excites me like no other lover*) he takes out a 'little black notebook' and begins to think about the book whose origins, as we gather from the archive, go back to his final year at Cambridge but it seems one of its energising forces may have come from the 'Dead/Red Centre' of Australia. It would be a novel about migrants whose personal journeys would explore the 'disjointedness of *here* and *there*, *then* and *now*, reality and dreams' (Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* 69). The degree to which Rushdie himself read the Australian landscape through his reading of *Voss*, a novel where 'the English language . . . performs movements of breath-taking beauty' (box 63, folder 42), and through Chatwin and Robyn Davidson and how these readings mediated the Arabian landscapes in *The Satanic Verses* would require competencies in Australian literature and culture which I no longer have. What is significant for us is the fact that in these notes Rushdie observes, 'the things that have real importance for me' include 'the painful but deep connection to Australia' (box 22, folder 7). These connections resurface in the great warmth with which he recounts that 'blissed-out zone' in the Blue Mountains where he (with his wife Elizabeth and son Zafar) spent December 1996 with Julie Clarke and Richard Neville, followed by Christmas with Rodney Hall at Bermagui, New South Wales (Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* 473–78).<sup>1</sup> The connection takes the form of linguistic indebtedness in at least two Australianisms in *The Satanic Verses* as well. The first, the word '*Hoosh*' for which we may create the following entry:

Hindi *hūs*, etymology obscure; wild, uncouth person, a ghoul, a demon, *The Satanic Verses* 48: 'You are no son of mine, but a ghoul, a hoosh, a demon up from hell,' writes Changez Chamchawala to his son Saladin. In nineteenth-century Australian slang 'hoosh' was used as a derogatory term for the Indian cameleers, based on the Hindi original. Did Rushdie become aware of this through Robyn Davidson?

And second, in the Alien Show (Rushdie, *Verses* 62) there is 'a coarse, belching creature like a puking cactus that came from a desert planet at the end of time: this was Matilda the Australien' (Austra+alien).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rushdie recounts the near-fatal motor car accident close to the NSW town of Milton. Struck by an on-coming truck, Rushdie's hired Holden slides sideways and heads towards a tree. Miraculously no-one (neither Rushdie nor Elizabeth nor Zafar) is hurt. The truckie, though, is interrogated: 'Well, was he a *Muzlim*? An *Islamic*? Was he *Eye-ray-nian*?' The truckie hadn't the foggiest idea who the driver of the Holden was, and why would he be interested in this *fatso* anyway? Dr Johnson who treated Rushdie said that this was 'the most exciting thing that's happened in Milton ever, probably.'

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