

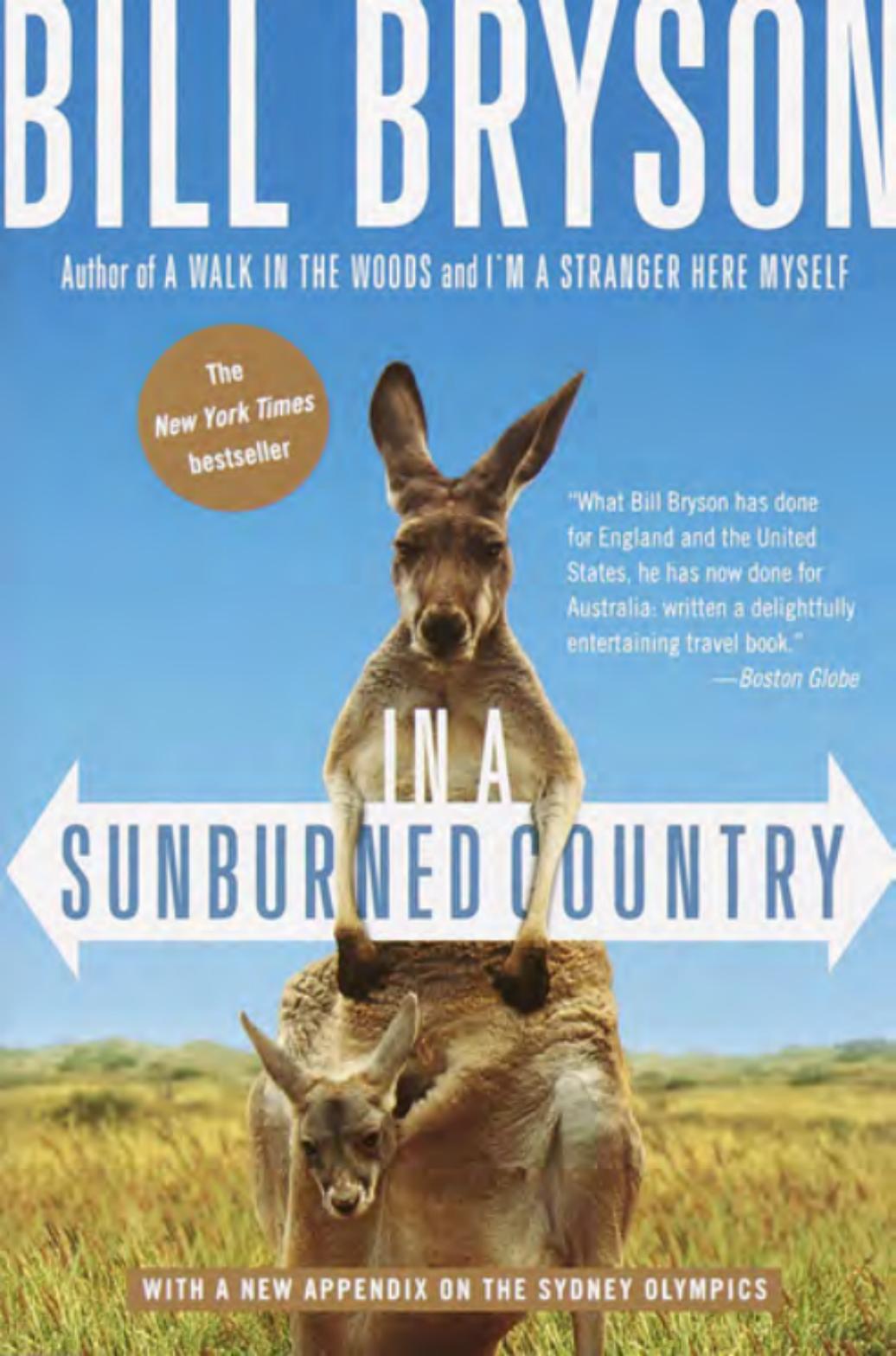
BILL BRYSON

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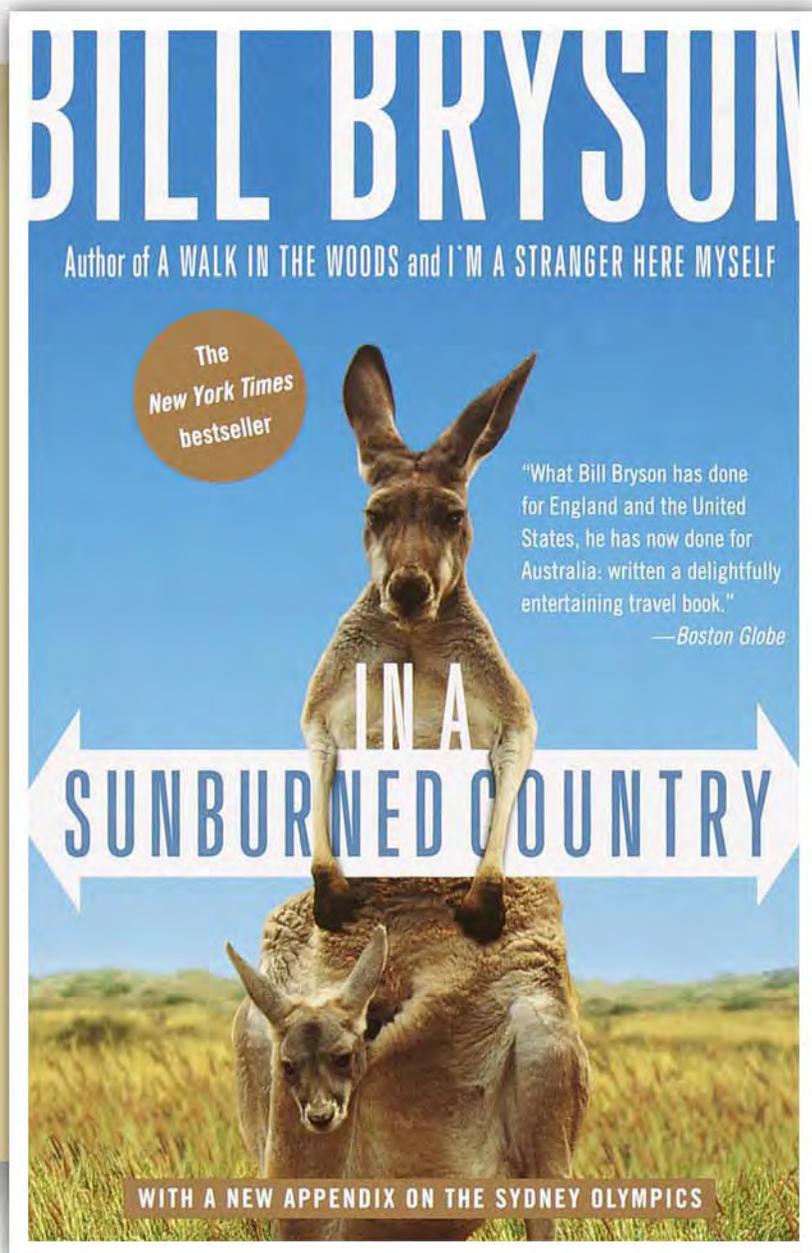
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Part One

Into the Outback



For more information visit Bill Bryson's website www.billbrysonbooks.com.

Chapter 1



FLYING INTO AUSTRALIA, I realized with a sigh that I had forgotten again who their prime minister is. I am forever doing this with the Australian prime minister—committing the name to memory, forgetting it (generally more or less instantly), then feeling terribly guilty. My thinking is that there ought to be one person outside Australia who knows.

But then Australia is such a difficult country to keep track of. On my first visit, some years ago, I passed the time on the long flight reading a history of Australian politics in the twentieth century, wherein I encountered the startling fact that in 1967 the prime minister, Harold Holt, was strolling along a beach in Victoria when he plunged into the surf and vanished. No trace of the poor man was ever seen again. This seemed doubly astounding to me—first that Australia could just *lose* a prime minister (I mean, come on) and second that news of this had never reached me.

The fact is, of course, we pay shamefully scant attention to our dear cousins Down Under—not entirely without reason, of course. Australia is after all mostly empty and a long way away. Its population, just over 18 million, is small by world standards—China grows by a larger amount each year—and its place in the world economy is consequently peripheral; as an economic entity, it ranks about level with Illinois. Its sports are of little interest to us and the last television series it made that we watched with avidity was *Skippy*. From time to time it sends us useful things—opals, merino wool, Errol Flynn, the boomerang—but nothing we can't actually



do without. Above all, Australia doesn't misbehave. It is stable and peaceful and good. It doesn't have coups, recklessly overfish, arm disagreeable despots, grow coca in provocative quantities, or throw its weight around in a brash and unseemly manner.

But even allowing for all this, our neglect of Australian affairs is curious. Just before I set off on this trip I went to my local library in New Hampshire and looked Australia up in the *New York Times Index* to see how much it had engaged our attention in recent years. I began with the 1997 volume for no other reason than that it was open on the table. In that year across the full range of possible interests—politics, sports, travel, the coming Olympics in Sydney, food and wine, the arts, obituaries, and so on—the *Times* ran 20 articles that were predominantly on or about Australian affairs. In the same period, for purposes of comparison, the *Times* ran 120 articles on Peru, 150 or so on Albania and a similar number on Cambodia, more than 300 on each of the Koreas, and well over 500 on Israel. As a place that caught our interest Australia ranked about level with Belarus and Burundi. Among the general subjects that outstripped it were balloons and balloonists, the Church of Scientology, dogs (though not dog sledding), Barneys, Inc., and Pamela Harriman, the former ambassador and socialite who died in February 1997, a misfortune that evidently required recording 22 times in the *Times*. Put in the crudest terms, Australia was slightly more important to us in 1997 than bananas, but not nearly as important as ice cream.

As it turns out, 1997 was actually quite a good year for Australian news. In 1996 the country was the subject of just nine news reports and in 1998 a mere six. Australians can't bear it that we pay so little attention to them, and I don't blame them. This is a country where interesting things happen, and all the time.

Consider just one of those stories that did make it into the *Times* in 1997, though buried away in the odd-sock drawer of Section C. In January of that year, according to a report written in America by a *Times* reporter, scientists were seriously investigating the possibility that a mysterious seismic disturbance in the remote Australian outback almost four years earlier had been a nuclear explosion set off by members of the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo.

It happens that at 11:03 P.M. local time on May 28, 1993, seismograph needles all over the Pacific region twitched and scribbled in response to a very large-scale disturbance near a place called



Banjawarn Station in the Great Victoria Desert of Western Australia. Some long-distance truckers and prospectors, virtually the only people out in that lonely expanse, reported seeing a sudden flash in the sky and hearing or feeling the boom of a mighty but far-off explosion. One reported that a can of beer had danced off the table in his tent.

The problem was that there was no obvious explanation. The seismograph traces didn't fit the profile for an earthquake or mining explosion, and anyway the blast was 170 times more powerful than the most powerful mining explosion ever recorded in Western Australia. The shock was consistent with a large meteorite strike, but the impact would have blown a crater hundreds of feet in circumference, and no such crater could be found. The upshot is that scientists puzzled over the incident for a day or two, then filed it away as an unexplained curiosity—the sort of thing that presumably happens from time to time.

Then in 1995 Aum Shinrikyo gained sudden notoriety when it released extravagant quantities of the nerve gas sarin into the Tokyo subway system, killing twelve people. In the investigations that followed, it emerged that Aum's substantial holdings included a 500,000-acre desert property in Western Australia very near the site of the mystery event. There, authorities found a laboratory of unusual sophistication and focus, and evidence that cult members had been mining uranium. It separately emerged that Aum had recruited into its ranks two nuclear engineers from the former Soviet Union. The group's avowed aim was the destruction of the world, and it appears that the event in the desert may have been a dry run for blowing up Tokyo.

You take my point, of course. This is a country that loses a prime minister and that is so vast and empty that a band of amateur enthusiasts could conceivably set off the world's first non-governmental atomic bomb on its mainland and almost four years would pass before anyone noticed.* Clearly this is a place worth getting to know.

* Interestingly, no Australian newspapers seem to have picked up on this story and the *New York Times* never returned to it, so what happened in the desert remains a mystery. Aum Shinrikyo sold its desert property in August 1994, fifteen months after the mysterious blast but seven months before it gained notoriety with its sarin attack in the Tokyo subway system. If any investigating authority took the obvious step of measuring the area around Banjawarn Station for increased levels of radiation, it has not been reported.



AND SO, BECAUSE WE KNOW so little about it, perhaps a few facts would be in order:

Australia is the world's sixth largest country and its largest island. It is the only island that is also a continent, and the only continent that is also a country. It was the first continent conquered from the sea, and the last. It is the only nation that began as a prison.

It is the home of the largest living thing on earth, the Great Barrier Reef, and of the largest monolith, Ayers Rock (or Uluru to use its now-official, more respectful Aboriginal name). It has more things that will kill you than anywhere else. Of the world's ten most poisonous snakes, all are Australian. Five of its creatures—the funnel web spider, box jellyfish, blue-ringed octopus, paralysis tick, and stonefish—are the most lethal of their type in the world. This is a country where even the fluffiest of caterpillars can lay you out with a toxic nip, where seashells will not just sting you but actually sometimes *go* for you. Pick up an innocuous cone shell from a Queensland beach, as innocent tourists are all too wont to do, and you will discover that the little fellow inside is not just astoundingly swift and testy but exceedingly venomous. If you are not stung or pronged to death in some unexpected manner, you may be fatally chomped by sharks or crocodiles, or carried helplessly out to sea by irresistible currents, or left to stagger to an unhappy death in the baking outback. It's a tough place.

And it is old. For 60 million years since the formation of the Great Dividing Range, the low but deeply fetching mountains that run down its eastern flank, Australia has been all but silent geologically. In consequence, things, once created, have tended just to lie there. So many of the oldest objects ever found on earth—the most ancient rocks and fossils, the earliest animal tracks and riverbeds, the first faint signs of life itself—have come from Australia.

At some undetermined point in the great immensity of its past—perhaps 45,000 years ago, perhaps 60,000, but certainly before there were modern humans in the Americas or Europe—it was quietly invaded by a deeply inscrutable people, the Aborigines, who have no clearly evident racial or linguistic kinship to their neighbors in the region, and whose presence in Australia can only be explained by positing that they invented and mastered ocean-



going craft at least 30,000 years in advance of anyone else, in order to undertake an exodus, then forgot or abandoned nearly all that they had learned and scarcely ever bothered with the open sea again.

It is an accomplishment so singular and extraordinary, so uncomfortable with scrutiny, that most histories breeze over it in a paragraph or two, then move on to the second, more explicable invasion—the one that begins with the arrival of Captain James Cook and his doughty little ship HMS *Endeavour* in Botany Bay in 1770. Never mind that Captain Cook didn't discover Australia and that he wasn't even yet a captain at the time of his visit. For most people, including most Australians, this is where the story begins.

The world those first Englishmen found was famously inverted—its seasons back to front, its constellations upside down—and unlike anything any of them had seen before even in the near latitudes of the Pacific. Its creatures seemed to have evolved as if they had misread the manual. The most characteristic of them didn't run or lope or canter, but *bounced* across the landscape, like dropped balls. The continent teemed with unlikely life. It contained a fish that could climb trees; a fox that flew (it was actually a very large bat); crustaceans so large that a grown man could climb inside their shells.

In short, there was no place in the world like it. There still isn't. Eighty percent of all that lives in Australia, plant and animal, exists nowhere else. More than this, it exists in an abundance that seems incompatible with the harshness of the environment. Australia is the driest, flattest, hottest, most desiccated, infertile, and climatically aggressive of all the inhabited continents. (Only Antarctica is more hostile to life.) This is a place so inert that even the soil is, technically speaking, a fossil. And yet it teems with life in numbers uncounted. For insects alone, scientists haven't the faintest idea whether the total number of species is 100,000 or more than twice that. As many as a third of those species remain entirely unknown to science. For spiders, the proportion rises to 80 percent.

I mention insects in particular because I have a story about a little bug called *Nothomyrmecia macrops* that I think illustrates perfectly, if a bit obliquely, what an exceptional country this is. It's a slightly involved tale but a good one, so bear with me, please.

In 1931 on the Cape Arid peninsula in Western Australia, some amateur naturalists were poking about in the scrubby wastes



when they found an insect none had seen before. It looked vaguely like an ant, but was an unusual pale yellow and had strange, staring, distinctly unsettling eyes. Some specimens were collected and these found their way to the desk of an expert at the National Museum of Victoria in Melbourne, who identified the insect at once as *Nothomyrmecia*. The discovery caused great excitement because, as far as anyone knew, nothing like it had existed on earth for a hundred million years. *Nothomyrmecia* was a proto-ant, a living relic from a time when ants were evolving from wasps. In entomological terms, it was as extraordinary as if someone had found a herd of triceratops grazing on some distant grassy plain.

An expedition was organized at once, but despite the most scrupulous searching, no one could find the Cape Arid colony. Subsequent searches came up equally empty-handed. Almost half a century later, when word got out that a team of American scientists was planning to search for the ant, almost certainly with the kind of high-tech gadgetry that would make the Australians look amateurish and underorganized, government scientists in Canberra decided to make one final, preemptive effort to find the ants alive. So a party of them set off in convoy across the country.

On the second day out, while driving across the South Australia desert, one of their vehicles began to smoke and sputter, and they were forced to make an unscheduled overnight stop at a lonely pause in the highway called Poochera. During the evening one of the scientists, a man named Bob Taylor, stepped out for a breath of air and idly played his flashlight over the surrounding terrain. You may imagine his astonishment when he discovered, crawling over the trunk of a eucalyptus beside their campsite, a thriving colony of none other than *Nothomyrmecia*.

Now consider the probabilities. Taylor and his colleagues were eight hundred miles from their intended search site. In the almost 3 million square miles of emptiness that is Australia, one of the handful of people able to identify it had just found one of the rarest, most sought-after insects on earth—an insect seen alive just once, almost half a century earlier—and all because their van had broken down where it did. *Nothomyrmecia*, incidentally, has still never been found at its original site.

You take my point again, I'm sure. This is a country that is at



once staggeringly empty and yet packed with stuff. Interesting stuff, ancient stuff, stuff not readily explained. Stuff yet to be found.

Trust me, this is an interesting place.

II

EACH TIME YOU FLY from North America to Australia, and without anyone asking how you feel about it, a day is taken away from you when you cross the international date line. I left Los Angeles on January 3 and arrived in Sydney fourteen hours later on January 5. For me there was no January 4. None at all. Where it went exactly I couldn't tell you. All I know is that for one twenty-four-hour period in the history of earth, it appears I had no being.

I find that a little uncanny, to say the least. I mean to say, if you were browsing through your ticket folder and you saw a notice that said, "Passengers are advised that on some crossings twenty-four-hour loss of existence may occur" (which is, of course, how they would phrase it, as if it happened from time to time), you would probably get up and make inquiries, grab a sleeve, and say, "Excuse me." There is, it must be said, a certain metaphysical comfort in knowing that you can cease to have material form and it doesn't hurt at all, and, to be fair, they do give you the day back on the return journey when you cross the date line in the opposite direction and thereby manage somehow to arrive in Los Angeles *before* you left Sydney, which in its way, of course, is an even neater trick.

Now, I vaguely understand the principles involved here. I can see that there has to be a notional line where one day ends and the next begins, and that when you cross that line temporal oddities will necessarily follow. But that still doesn't get away from the fact that on any trip between America and Australia you will experience something that would be, in any other circumstance, the starkest impossibility. However hard you train or concentrate or watch your diet, no matter how many steps you take on the StairMaster, you are never going to get so fit that you can cease to occupy space for twenty-four hours or be able to arrive in one room before you left the last one.

So there is a certain sense of achievement just in arriving in Australia—a pleasure and satisfaction to be able to step from the



airport terminal into dazzling antipodean sunshine and realize that all your many atoms, so recently missing and unaccounted for, have been reassembled in an approximately normal manner (less half a pound or so of brain cells that were lost while watching a Bruce Willis movie). In the circumstances, it is a pleasure to find yourself anywhere; that it is Australia is a positive bonus.

Let me say right here that I love Australia—adore it immeasurably—and am smitten anew each time I see it. One of the effects of paying so little attention to Australia is that it is always such a pleasant surprise to find it there. Every cultural instinct and previous experience tells you that when you travel this far you should find, at the very least, people on camels. There should be unrecognizable lettering on the signs, and swarthy men in robes drinking coffee from thimble-sized cups and puffing on hookahs, and rattletrap buses and potholes in the road and a real possibility of disease on everything you touch—but no, it's not like that at all. This is comfortable and clean and familiar. Apart from a tendency among men of a certain age to wear knee-high socks with shorts, these people are just like you and me. This is wonderful. This is exhilarating. This is why I love to come to Australia.

There are other reasons as well, of course, and I am pleased to put them on the record here. The people are immensely likable—cheerful, extrovert, quick-witted, and unfailingly obliging. Their cities are safe and clean and nearly always built on water. They have a society that is prosperous, well ordered, and instinctively egalitarian. The food is excellent. The beer is cold. The sun nearly always shines. There is coffee on every corner. Rupert Murdoch no longer lives there. Life doesn't get much better than this.

This was my fifth trip and this time, for the first time, I was going to see the real Australia—the vast and baking interior, the boundless void that lies between the coasts. I have never entirely understood why when people urge you to see their “real” country, they send you to the empty parts where almost no sane person would choose to live, but there you are. You cannot say you have been to Australia until you have crossed the outback.

Best of all, I was going to do it in the swankiest possible way: on the fabled Indian Pacific railroad from Sydney to Perth. Running for 2,720 pleasantly meandering miles across the bottom third of the country, through the states of New South Wales, South Australia, and Western Australia, the Indian Pacific is the queen of



the Southern Hemisphere trainwise. From Sydney it climbs gently through the Blue Mountains, chunters across endless miles of big-sky sheep country, traces the Darling River to the Murray and the Murray on toward Adelaide, and finally crosses the mighty Nullarbor Plain to the goldfields around Kalgoorlie before sighing to a well-earned halt in distant Perth. The Nullarbor, an almost inconceivable expanse of murderous desert, was something I particularly longed to see.

The color magazine of the *London Mail on Sunday* was doing a special issue on Australia, and I had agreed to file a report. I had been planning to come out soon anyway to start the traveling for this book, so this was in the nature of a bonus trip—a chance to get the measure of the country in an exceedingly comfortable way at someone else’s expense. Sounded *awfully* good to me. To that end, I would be traveling for the next week or so in the company of a young English photographer named Trevor Ray Hart, who was flying in from London and whom I would meet for the first time the next morning.

But first I had a day to call my own, and I was inordinately pleased about that. I had never been to Sydney other than on book tours, so my acquaintance with the city was based almost entirely on cab journeys through unsung districts like Ultimo and Annandale. The only time I had seen anything at all of the real city was some years before, on my first visit, when a kindly sales rep from my local publisher had taken me out for the day in his car, with his wife and two little girls in back, and I had disgraced myself by falling asleep. It wasn’t from lack of interest or appreciation, believe me. It’s just that the day was warm and I was newly arrived in the country. At some unfortunate point, quite early on, jet lag asserted itself and I slumped helplessly into a coma.

I am not, I regret to say, a discreet and fetching sleeper. Most people when they nod off look as if they could do with a blanket; I look as if I could do with medical attention. I sleep as if injected with a powerful experimental muscle relaxant. My legs fall open in a grotesque come-hither manner; my knuckles brush the floor. Whatever is inside—tongue, uvula, moist bubbles of intestinal air—decides to leak out. From time to time, like one of those nodding-duck toys, my head tips forward to empty a quart or so of viscous drool onto my lap, then falls back to begin loading again with a noise like a toilet cistern filling. And I snore, hugely and



helplessly, like a cartoon character, with rubbery flapping lips and prolonged steam-valve exhalations. For long periods I grow unnaturally still, in a way that inclines onlookers to exchange glances and lean forward in concern, then dramatically I stiffen and, after a tantalizing pause, begin to bounce and jostle in a series of whole-body spasms of the sort that bring to mind an electric chair when the switch is thrown. Then I shriek once or twice in a piercing and effeminate manner and wake up to find that all motion within five hundred feet has stopped and all children under eight are clutching their mothers' hems. It is a terrible burden to bear.

I have no idea how long I slept in that car other than that it was not a short while. All I know is that when I came to, there was a certain heavy silence in the car—the kind of silence that would close over you if you found yourself driving around your own city conveying a slumped and twitching heap from one unperceived landmark to another.

I looked around dumbly, not certain for the moment who these people were, cleared my throat, and pulled myself to a more upright position.

“We were wondering if you might like some lunch,” my guide said quietly when he saw that I had abandoned for the moment the private ambition to flood his car with saliva.

“That would be very nice,” I replied in a small, abject voice, discovering in the same instant, with a customary inward horror, that while I had dozed a four-hundred-pound fly had evidently been sick over me. In an attempt to distract attention from my unnatural moist sheen and at the same time reestablish my interest in the tour, I added more brightly, “Is this still Neutral Bay?”

There was a small involuntary snort of the sort you make when a drink goes down the wrong way. And then with a certain strained precision: “No, this is Dover Heights. Neutral Bay was”—a microsecond's pause, just to aerate the point—“some time ago.”

“Ah.” I made a grave face, as if trying to figure out how we had managed between us to mislay such a chunk of time.

“Quite some time ago, in fact.”

“Ah.”

We rode the rest of the way to lunch in silence. The afternoon was more successful. We dined at a popular fish restaurant beside the pier at Watsons Bay, then went to look at the Pacific from the



lofty, surf-battered cliffs that stand above the harbor mouth. On the way home the drive provided snatched views of what is unquestionably the loveliest harbor in the world—blue water, gliding sailboats, the distant iron arc of the Harbour Bridge with the Opera House squatting cheerfully beside it. But still I had not seen Sydney properly, and early the next day I had to depart for Melbourne.

So I was eager, as you may imagine, to make amends now. Sydneysiders, as they are rather quaintly known, have an evidently unquenchable desire to show their city off to visitors, and I had yet another kind offer of guidance before me, this time from a journalist on the *Sydney Morning Herald* named Deirdre Macken. An alert and cheerful woman of early middle years, Deirdre met me at my hotel with a young photographer named Glenn Hunt, and we set off on foot to the Museum of Sydney, a sleek and stylish new institution, which manages to look interesting and instructive without actually being either. You find yourself staring at artfully underlit displays—a caseful of immigrant artifacts, a room wallpapered with the pages of popular magazines from the 1950s—without being entirely certain what you are expected to conclude. But we did have a very nice latte in the attached café, at which point Deirdre outlined her plans for our busy day.

In a moment we would stroll down to Circular Quay and catch a ferry across the harbor to the Taronga Zoo wharf. We wouldn't actually visit the zoo, but instead would hike around Little Sirius Cove and up through the steep and jungly hills of Cremorne Point to Deirdre's house, where we would gather up some towels and boogie boards and go by car to Manly, a beach suburb overlooking the Pacific. At Manly we would grab a bite of lunch, then have an invigorating session of boogie boarding before towelng ourselves down and heading for—

“Excuse me for interrupting,” I interrupted, “but what is boogie boarding exactly?”

“Oh, it's fun. You'll love it,” she said breezily but, I thought, just a touch evasively.

“Yes, but what is it?”

“It's an aquatic sport. It's heaps of fun. Isn't it heaps of fun, Glenn?”

“Heaps,” agreed Glenn, who was, in the manner of all people whose film stock is paid for, in the midst of taking an infinite number



of photographs. *Bizeet, bizeet, bizeet*, his camera sang as he took three quick and ingeniously identical photographs of Deirdre and me in conversation.

“But what does it entail exactly?” I persisted.

“You take a kind of miniature surfboard and paddle out into the sea where you catch a big wave and ride it back to shore. It’s easy. You’ll love it.”

“What about sharks?” I asked uneasily.

“Oh, there’s hardly any sharks here. Glenn, how long has it been since someone was killed by a shark?”

“Oh, ages,” Glenn said, considering. “Couple of months at least.”

“Couple of months?” I squeaked.

“At least. Sharks are way overrated as a danger,” Glenn added. “Way overrated. It’s the rips that’ll most likely get yer.” He returned to taking pictures.

“Rips?”

“Underwater currents that run at an angle to the shore and sometimes carry people out to sea,” Deirdre explained. “But don’t worry. That won’t happen to you.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re here to look after you.” She smiled serenely, drained her cup, and reminded us that we needed to keep moving.

THREE HOURS LATER, our other activities completed, we stood on a remote-seeming strand at a place called Freshwater Beach, near Manly. It was a big U-shaped bay, edged by low scrub hills, with what seemed to me awfully big waves pounding in from a vast and moody sea. In the middle distance several foolhardy souls in wet suits were surfing toward some foamy outbursts on the rocky headland; nearer in, a scattering of paddlers was being continually and, it seemed, happily engulfed by explosive waves.

Urged on by Deirdre, who seemed keen as anything to get into the briny drink, we began to strip down—slowly and deliberately in my case, eagerly in hers—to the swimsuits she had instructed us to wear beneath our clothes.

“If you’re caught in a rip,” Deirdre was saying, “the trick is not to panic.”

I looked at her. “You’re telling me to drown calmly?”



“No, no. Just keep your wits. Don’t try to swim against the current. Swim *across* it. And if you’re still in trouble, just wave your arm like this”—she gave the kind of big, languorous wave that only an Australian could possibly consider an appropriate response to a death-at-sea situation—“and wait for the lifeguard to come.”

“What if the lifeguard doesn’t see me?”

“He’ll see you.”

“But what if he doesn’t?”

But Deirdre was already wading into the surf, a boogie board tucked under her arm.

Bashfully I dropped my shirt onto the sand and stood naked but for my sagging trunks. Glenn, never having seen anything quite this grotesque and singular on an Australian beach, certainly nothing still alive, snatched up his camera and began excitedly taking close-up shots of my stomach. *Bizeet, bizeet, bizeet, bizeet*, his camera sang happily as he followed me into the surf.

Let me just pause here for a moment to interpose two small stories. In 1935, not far from where we stood now, some fishermen captured a fourteen-foot beige shark and took it to a public aquarium at Coogee, where it was put on display. The shark swam around for a day or two in its new home, then abruptly, and to the certain surprise of the viewing public, regurgitated a human arm. When last seen the arm had been attached to a young man named Jimmy Smith, who had, I’ve no doubt, signaled his predicament with a big, languorous wave.

Now my second story. Three years later, on a clear, bright, calm Sunday afternoon at Bondi Beach, also not far from where we now stood, from out of nowhere there came four freak waves, each up to twenty-five feet high. More than two hundred people were carried out to sea in the undertow. Fortunately fifty lifeguards were in attendance that day, and they managed to save all but six people. I am aware that we are talking about incidents that happened many years ago. I don’t care. My point remains: the ocean is a treacherous place.

Sighing, I shuffled into the pale green and cream-flecked water. The bay was surprisingly shallow. We trudged perhaps a hundred feet out and it was still only a little over our knees, though even here there was an extraordinarily powerful current—strong enough to pull you off your feet if you weren’t real vigilant. Another fifty feet on, where the water rose over our waists, the waves



were breaking. If you discount a few hours in the lagoonlike waters of the Costa del Sol in Spain and an icy, instantly regretted dip once in Maine, I have almost no experience of the sea, and I found it frankly disconcerting to be wading into a roller coaster of water. Deirdre shrieked with pleasure.

Then she showed me how the boogie board works. It was promisingly simple in principle. As a wave passed, she would leap aboard and skim along on its crest for many yards. Then Glenn had a turn and went even farther. There is no question that it looked like fun. It didn't look too hard either. I was tentatively eager to have a try.

I positioned myself for the first wave, then jumped aboard and sank like an anvil.

"How'd you do that?" asked Glenn in wonder.

"No idea."

I repeated the exercise with the same result.

"Amazing," he said.

There followed a half hour in which the two of them watched first with guarded amusement, then a kind of astonishment, and finally something not unlike pity, as I repeatedly vanished beneath the waves and was scraped over an area of ocean floor roughly the size of Polk County, Iowa. After a variable but lengthy period, I would surface, gasping and confused, at a point anywhere from four feet to a mile and a quarter distant, and be immediately carried under again by a following wave. Before long, people on the beach were on their feet and placing bets. It was commonly agreed that it was not physically possible to do what I was doing.

From my point of view, each underwater experience was essentially the same. I would diligently attempt to replicate the dainty kicking motions Deirdre had shown me and try to ignore the fact that I was going nowhere and mostly drowning. Not having anything to judge this against, I supposed I was doing rather well. I can't pretend I was having a good time, but then it is a mystery to me how anyone could wade into such a merciless environment and expect to have fun. But I was resigned to my fate and knew that eventually it would be over.

Perhaps it was the oxygen deprivation, but I was rather lost in my own little world when Deirdre grabbed my arm just before I was about to go under again and said in a husky tone, "Look out! There's a bluey."



Glenn took on an immediate expression of alarm. “Where?”

“What’s a bluey?” I asked, appalled to discover that there was some additional danger I hadn’t been told about.

“A bluebottle,” she explained, and pointed to a small jellyfish of the type (as I later learned from browsing through a fat book titled, if I recall, *Things That Will Kill You Horridly in Australia*, volume 19) known elsewhere as a Portuguese man-of-war. I squinted at it as it drifted past. It looked unprepossessing, like a blue condom with strings attached.

“Is it dangerous?” I asked.

Now, before we hear Deirdre’s response to me as I stood there, vulnerable and abraded, shivering, nearly naked and half drowned, let me just quote from her subsequent article in the *Herald’s* weekend magazine:

While the photographer shoots, Bryson and boogie board are dragged 40 meters down the beach in a rip. The shore rip runs south to north, unlike the rip further out which runs north to south. Bryson doesn’t know this. He didn’t read the warning sign on the beach. Nor does he know about the bluebottle being blown in his direction—now less than a meter away—a swollen stinger that could give him 20 minutes of agony and, if he’s unlucky, an unsightly allergic reaction to carry on his torso for life.*

“Dangerous? No,” Deirdre replied now as we stood gawping at the bluebottle. “But don’t brush against it.”

“Why not?”

“Might be a bit uncomfortable.”

I looked at her with an expression of interest bordering on admiration. Long bus journeys are uncomfortable. Slatted wooden benches are uncomfortable. Lulls in conversations are uncomfortable. The sting of a Portuguese man-of-war—even Iowans know this—is *agony*. It occurred to me that Australians are so surrounded with danger that they have evolved an entirely new vocabulary to deal with it.

* The statement is inarguable. However, the author would like the record to show that he did not have his glasses on; he trusted his hosts; he was scanning a large area of ocean for sharks; and he was endeavoring throughout not to excrete a large house brick into his pants.



“Hey, there’s another one,” said Glenn.

We watched another one drift by. Deirdre was scanning the water.

“Sometimes they come in waves,” she said. “Might be an idea to get out of the water.”

I didn’t have to be told twice.

THERE WAS ONE MORE THING that Deirdre felt I needed to see if I was to have any understanding of Australian life and culture, so afterward, as late afternoon gave way to the pale blush of evening, we drove out through the glittering sprawl of Sydney’s western suburbs almost to the edge of the Blue Mountains to a place called Penrith. Our destination was an enormous sleek building, surrounded by an even more enormous, very full, parking lot. An illuminated sign announced this as the Penrith Panthers World of Entertainment. The Panthers, Glenn explained, were a rugby club.

Australia is a country of clubs—sporting clubs, workmen’s clubs, Returned Servicemen’s League clubs, clubs affiliated with various political parties—each nominally, and sometimes no doubt actively, devoted to the well-being of a particular segment of society. What they are really there for, however, is to generate extremely large volumes of money from drinking and gambling.

I had read in the paper that Australians are the biggest gamblers on the planet—one of the more arresting statistics I saw was that the country has less than 1 percent of the world’s population but more than 20 percent of its slot machines—and that between them they spend A\$11 billion (\$7.3 billion) a year, or A\$2,000 per person, on various games of chance.* But I had seen nothing to suggest such risky gusto until I stepped inside the World of Entertainment. It was vast and dazzling and immensely well appointed. The club movement in Australia is huge. In New South Wales alone, clubs employ 65,000 people, more than any other industry. This is huge business and it is nearly all based on a type of slot machine popularly called pokies.

I had assumed that we would have to bend the rules to get admitted—it was a club, after all—but in fact I learned that all

* Unless otherwise indicated, all dollar sums refer to Australian dollars. As of early 2000, one American dollar was worth roughly \$1.50 Australian.



Australian clubs allow instant membership to anyone, so keen are they to share the diverting pleasures of the pokie machine. You just sign a temporary-members' book by the door and in you go.

Surveying the crowds with a benign and cheerful eye was a man whose badge identified him as Peter Hutton, Duty Manager. In the manner of nearly all Australians, he was an easygoing and approachable sort. I quickly learned from him that this particular club has sixty thousand members, of whom twenty thousand will turn up on busy nights, like New Year's Eve. Tonight the figure would be more like two thousand. The club contained bars and restaurants almost beyond counting, sports facilities, a children's play area, and nightclubs and theaters. They were just about to build a thirteen-screen movie theater and a nursery big enough to hold four hundred infants and toddlers.

"Wow," I said. "So is this the biggest club in Sydney?"

"Biggest in the Southern Hemisphere," Mr. Hutton said proudly.

We wandered into the vast and tinkling interior. Hundreds of pokie machines stood in long straight lines, and at nearly every one sat an intent figure feeding in the mortgage money. They are essentially slot machines, but with a bewildering array of illuminated buttons and flashing lights that let you exercise a variety of options—whether to hold a particular line, double your stake, take a portion of your winnings, and goodness knows what else. I studied from a discreet distance several people at play, but couldn't begin to understand what they were doing, other than feeding a succession of coins into a glowing box and looking grim. Deirdre and Glenn were similarly unacquainted with the intricacies of pokies. We put in a two-dollar coin, just to see what would happen, and got an instant payout of seventeen dollars. This made us immensely joyful.

I returned to the hotel like a kid who had had a very full day at the county fair—exhausted but deeply happy. I had survived the perils of the sea, been to a palatial club, helped to win fifteen dollars, and made two new friends. I can't say I was a great deal closer to feeling that I had actually seen Sydney than I had been before, but that day would come. Meanwhile, I had a night's sleep to get and a train to catch.



Chapter 2



I BELIEVE I FIRST REALIZED I was going to like the Australian outback when I read that the Simpson Desert, an area bigger than some European countries, was named in 1932* for a manufacturer of washing machines. (Specifically, Alfred Simpson, who funded an aerial survey.) It wasn't so much the pleasingly unheroic nature of the name as the knowledge that an expanse of Australia more than 100,000 miles square didn't even *have* a name until less than seventy years ago. I have near relatives who have had names longer than that.

But then that's the thing about the outback—it's so vast and forbidding that much of it is still scarcely charted. Even Uluru, as we must learn to call Ayers Rock, was unseen by anyone but its Aboriginal caretakers until only a little over a century ago. It's not even possible to say quite where the outback is. To Australians anything vaguely rural is "the bush." At some indeterminate point "the bush" becomes "the outback." Push on for another two thousand miles or so and eventually you come to bush again, and then a city, and then the sea. And that's Australia.

And so, in the company of the photographer Trevor Ray Hart, an amiable young man in shorts and a faded T-shirt, I took a cab to Sydney's Central Station, an imposing heap of bricks on Elizabeth

* According to the Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey; but 1929 according to the *National Geographic*. There's hardly a fact about Australia that isn't significantly contradicted somewhere in print by somebody.

Street, and there we found our way through its dim and venerable concourse to our train.

Stretching for a third of a mile along the curving platform, the Indian Pacific was everything the brochure illustrations had promised—silvery sleek, shiny as a new nickel, humming with that sense of impending adventure that comes with the start of a long journey on a powerful machine. Carriage G, one of seventeen on the train, was in the charge of a cheerful steward named Terry, who thoughtfully provided a measure of local color by accompanying every remark with an upbeat Aussie turn of phrase.

Need a glass of water?

“No worries, mate. I’ll get right on ’er.”

Just received word that your mother has died?

“Not a drama. She’ll be apples.”

He showed us to our berths, a pair of singles on opposite sides of a narrow paneled corridor. The cabins were astoundingly tiny—so tiny that you could bend over and actually get stuck.

“This is it?” I said in mild consternation. “In its entirety?”

“No worries,” Terry beamed. “She’s a bit snug, but you’ll find she’s got everything you need.”

And he was right. Everything you could possibly require in a living space was there. It was just very compact, not much larger than a standard wardrobe. But it was a marvel of ergonomics. It included a comfy built-in seat, a hide-away basin and toilet, a miniature cupboard, an overhead shelf just large enough for one very small suitcase, two reading lights, a pair of clean towels, and a little amenity bag. In the wall was a narrow drop-down bed, which didn’t so much drop down as fall out like a hastily stowed corpse as I, and I expect many other giddily experimental passengers, discovered after looking ruminatively at the door and thinking, “I wonder what’s behind there?” Still, it did make for an interesting surprise, and freeing my various facial protuberances from its coiled springs helped to pass the half hour before departure.

And then at last the train thrummed to life and we slid regally out of Sydney Central. We were on our way.

Done in one fell swoop, the journey to Perth takes nearly three days. Our instructions, however, were to disembark at the old mining town of Broken Hill to sample the outback and see what might bite us. So for Trevor and me the rail journey would be in two parts: an overnight run to Broken Hill and then a two-day haul



across the Nullarbor. The train trundled out through the endless western suburbs of Sydney—through Flemington, Auburn, Parramatta, Doonside, and the adorably named Rooty Hill—then picked up a little speed as we entered the Blue Mountains, where the houses thinned out and we were treated to long end-of-afternoon views across steep-sided vales and hazy forests of gum trees, whose quiet respirations give the hills their eponymous tinge.

I went off to explore the train. Our domain, the first-class section, consisted of five sleeping cars, a dining car in a plush and velvety style that might be called *fin de siècle brothelkeeper*, and a lounge car in a rather more modern mode. This was provisioned with soft chairs, a small promising-looking bar, and low but relentless piped music from a twenty-volume compilation called, at a guess, “Songs You Hoped You’d Never Hear Again.” A mournful duet from *The Phantom of the Opera* was playing as I passed through.

Beyond first class was the slightly cheaper holiday class, which was much the same as ours except that their dining area was a buffet car with bare plastic tables. (These people apparently needed wiping down after meals.) The passage beyond the holiday class was barred by a windowless door, which was locked.

“What’s back there?” I asked the buffet car girl.

“Coach class,” she said with a shudder.

“Is this door always locked?”

She nodded gravely. “Always.”

Coach class would become my obsession. But first it was time for dinner. The PA system announced the first sitting. Ethel Merman was belting out “There’s No Business Like Show Business” as I passed back through the first-class lounge. Say what you will, the woman had lungs.

FOR ALL ITS AIR OF CULTIVATED VENERABILITY, the Indian Pacific is actually an infant as rail systems go, having been created as recently as 1969 when a new standard-gauge line was built across the country. Before that, for various arcane reasons mostly to do with regional distrust and envy, Australian railroad lines employed different gauges. New South Wales had rails 4 feet 8½ inches apart. Victoria opted for a more commodious 5 feet 3 inches. Queensland and Western Australia economically decided on a



standard of 3 feet 6 inches (a width not far off that of amusement park rides; people must have ridden with their legs out the windows). South Australia, inventively, had all three. Five times on any journey between the east and west coasts passengers and freight had to be off-loaded from one train and redeposited on another, a mad and tedious process. Finally sanity was mustered and an all-new line was built. It is the second longest line in the world, after Russia's Trans-Siberian.

I know all this because Trevor and I sat at dinner with a pair of quiet middle-aged teachers from rural north Queensland, Keith and Daphne. This was a big trip for them on teachers' salaries, and Keith had done his homework. He talked with enthusiasm about the train, the landscape, the recent bushfires—we were passing through Lithgow where hundreds of acres of bush had been scorched and two fire fighters had lost their lives just a month earlier—but when I asked about Aborigines (the question of land reforms had been much in the news) he grew suddenly vague and flustered.

"It's a problem," he said, staring hard at his food.

"At the school where I teach," Daphne went on hesitantly, "the Aboriginal parents, well, they get their welfare check and spend it on drink and then go walkabout. And the teachers have to, well, *feed* the children—you know, out of their own pockets. Otherwise the children wouldn't eat."

"It's a problem," Keith said again, still fixed on his food.

"But they're lovely people really. When they're not drinking."

And that pretty well killed the conversation.

After dinner Trevor and I ventured into the lounge car. While Trevor went to the bar to order I sank into an easy chair and watched the dusky landscape. It was farming country, vaguely arid. The background music, I noted with idle interest, had gone from "Much Loved Show Tunes" to "Party Time at the Nursing Home." "Roll Out the Barrel" was just finishing when we arrived and was swiftly succeeded by "Toot Toot Tootsie, Goodbye."

"Interesting choice of music," I observed dryly to the young couple opposite me.

"Yes, lovely!" they replied with simultaneous enthusiasm.

Suppressing an urge to shriek, I turned in desperation to the man beside me—an educated-looking older man in a suit, which was striking because everyone else on the train was in casual wear.



We chatted about this and that. He was a retired solicitor from Canberra on his way to visit a son in Perth. He seemed a reasonable and perceptive sort, so I mentioned to him, in a confiding tone, my puzzling conversation with the schoolteachers from Queensland.

“Ah, Aborigines,” he said, nodding solemnly. “A great problem.”

“So I gather.”

“They want hanging, every one of them.”

I looked at him, startled, and found a face on the edge of fury.

“Every bloody one of them,” he said, jowls trembling, and without another word took his leave.

Aborigines, I reflected, were something I would have to look into. But for the moment I decided to keep the conversation to simple matters—weather, scenery, popular show tunes—until I had a better grasp of things.

THE GREAT IF OBVIOUS FEATURE OF A TRAIN, as compared with a hotel room, is that your view is ever changing. In the morning I awoke to a new world: red soil, scrubby vegetation, huge skies, and an encircling horizon broken only by an occasional skeletal gum tree. As I peered blearily from my narrow perch, a pair of kangaroos, flushed by the train, bounded across the foreground. It was an exciting moment. We were definitely in Australia now!

We arrived at Broken Hill just after eight and stepped blinking from the train. An airless heat hung over the land—the kind of heat that hits you when you open an oven door to check a roasting turkey. Waiting for us on the platform was Sonja Stubing, a good-natured young woman from the regional tourist office who had been sent to collect us from the station and take us to pick up a rental car for a drive around the outback.

“How hot does it get here?” I asked, breathing out hard.

“Well, the record’s 48.”

I thought for a minute. “That’s 118 degrees!” I said.

She nodded serenely. “It was 42 yesterday.”

Another brief calculation: 107 degrees. “That’s very hot.”

She nodded. “Too hot.”

Broken Hill was a positively delightful little community—clean, trim, cheerfully prosperous. Unfortunately this was not at all what we wanted. We wanted proper outback: a place where men



were men and sheep were nervous. Here there were cafés and a bookstore, travel agents offering enticing packages to Bali and Singapore. They were even doing a Noel Coward play at the civic center. This wasn't the outback at all. This was the Hamptons with the heat turned up.

Things took a more hopeful turn when we went to Len Vodic Vehicle Hire to pick up a four-wheel-drive for a two-day jaunt into the baking wilderness. The eponymous Len was a wiry old guy, energetic and friendly, who looked as if he had spent every day of his life doing tough stuff in the out-of-doors. He jumped behind the wheel and gave us the kind of swift, thorough rundown that people give when they assume they are dealing with intelligent and capable listeners. The interior presented a bewildering assortment of dials, levers, knobs, gauges, and toggles.

"Now, say you get stuck in sand and need to increase your off-side differential," Len was saying on one of the intermittent occasions I dipped into the lecture. "You move this handle forward like so, select a hyperdrive ratio of between 12 and 27, elevate the ailerons, and engage both thrust motors—but *not* the left-hand one. That's very important. And whatever you do, watch your gauges and don't go over 180 degrees on the combustulator, or the whole thing'll blow and you'll be stuck out there."

He jumped out and handed us the keys. "There's twenty-five liters of spare diesel in the back. That should be more than enough if you go wrong." He looked at each of us in turn, more carefully. "I'll get you some more diesel," he decided.

"Did you understand any of that?" I whispered to Trevor when he had gone.

"Not past the putting-the-key-in-the-ignition part."

I called to Len, "What happens if we get stuck or lost?"

"Why, you die of course!" Actually he didn't say that, but that's what I was thinking. I had been reading accounts of people who had been lost or stranded in the outback, like the explorer Ernest Giles, who spent days wandering waterless and half dead before coming fortuitously on a baby wallaby that had tumbled from its mother's pouch. "I pounced upon it," Giles related in his memoirs, "and ate it, living, raw, dying—fur, skin, bones, skull and all." And this was one of the happier stories. Believe me, you don't want to get lost in the outback.

I began to feel a tremor of foreboding—a feeling not lightened



when Sonja gave a cry of delight at the sight of a spider by our feet and said, “Hey, look, a redback!” A redback, if you don’t know already, is death on eight legs. As Trevor and I whimperingly tried to climb into each other’s arms, she snatched it up and held it out to us on the tip of a finger.

“It’s all right,” she giggled. “It’s dead.”

We peered cautiously at the little object on her fingertip, a tell-tale red hourglass shape on its shiny back. It seemed unlikely that something so small could deliver instant agony, but make no mistake, a single nip from a redback’s malicious jaws can result within minutes in “frenzied twitching, a profuse flow of body fluids and, in the absence of prompt medical attention, possible death.” Or so the literature reports.

“You probably won’t see any redbacks out there,” Sonja reassured us. “Snakes are much more of a problem.”

This intelligence was received with four raised eyebrows and expressions that said, “Go on.”

She nodded. “Common brown, western taipan, western puff pastry, yellow-backed lockjaw, eastern groin groper, dodge viper . . .” I don’t remember what she said exactly, but it was a long list. “But don’t worry,” she continued. “Most snakes don’t want to hurt you. If you’re out in the bush and a snake comes along, just stop dead and let it slide over your shoes.”

This, I decided, was the least-likely-to-be-followed advice I have ever been given.

Our extra diesel loaded, we climbed aboard and, with a grinding of gears, a couple of bronco lurches, and a lively but inadvertent salute of windshield wipers, took to the open road. Our instructions were to drive to Menindee, 110 kilometers to the east, where we would be met by a man named Steve Garland. In the event, the drive to Menindee was something of an anticlimax. The landscape was shimmering hot and gorgeously forbidding. We were gratified to see our first willy-willy, a column of rotating dust perhaps a hundred feet high, impressive but harmless, moving across the endless plains to our left. But this was as close to adventure as we got. The road was newly paved and relatively well traveled. While Trevor stopped to take pictures, I counted four cars pass. Had we broken down, we wouldn’t have been stranded more than a few minutes.

Menindee was a modest hamlet on the Darling River: a couple



of streets of sunbaked bungalows, a gas station, two shops, the Burke and Wills Motel (named for a pair of nineteenth-century explorers who inevitably came a cropper in the unforgiving outback), and the semifamous Maidens Hotel, where in 1860 the aforementioned Burke and Wills spent their last night in civilization before meeting their unhappy fate in the barren void to the north.

We met Steve Garland at the motel and, to celebrate our safe arrival and recent discovery of fifth gear, crossed the road to Maidens and joined the noisy hubbub within. Maidens' long bar was lined from end to end with sun-leathered men in shorts and sweat-stained muscle shirts and wide-brimmed hats. It was like stepping into a Paul Hogan movie. This was more like it.

"So which window do they eject the bodies through?" I asked the amiable Steve when we were seated, thinking that Trevor would probably like to set up his equipment for a shot at chucking-out time.

"Oh, it's not like that here," he said. "Things aren't as wild in the outback as people think. It's pretty civilized really." He looked around with what was clearly real fondness and exchanged hellos with a couple of dusty-looking characters.

Garland was a professional photographer in Sydney until his partner, Lisa Menke, was appointed chief warden of Kinchega National Park up the road. He took a job as the regional tourism and development officer. His territory covered 26,000 square miles, an area half the size of England, but with a population of just 2,500. His challenge was to persuade dubious locals that there are people in the world prepared to pay good money to vacation in a place that is vast, dry, empty, featureless, and ungodly hot. The other part of his challenge was to find such people.

Between the merciless sun and the isolation, outback people are not always the most gifted of communicators. We had heard of one shopkeeper who, upon being asked by a smiling visitor from Sydney where the fish were biting, stared at the man incredulously for a long moment and replied, "In the fucking river, mate, where do you think?"

Garland only grinned when I put the story to him, but conceded that there was a certain occasional element of challenge involved in getting the locals to see the possibilities inherent in tourism.

He asked us how our drive had been.



I told him that I had expected it to be a little more harsh.
“Wait till tomorrow,” he said.

HE WAS RIGHT. In the morning we set off in mini-convoy, Steve and his partner Lisa in one car, Trevor and I in the other, for White Cliffs, an old opal-mining community 250 kilometers to the north. Half a mile outside Menindee the asphalt ended and the surface gave way to a hard earthen road full of potholes, ruts, and cement-hard corrugations, as jarring as driving over railway ties.

We jounced along for hours, raising enormous clouds of red dust in our wake, through a landscape brilliantly hot and empty, over tabletop lands flecked with low saltbush and spiky spinifex, the odd turpentine bush and weary-looking eucalypt. Here and there along the roadside were the corpses of kangaroos and occasional basking goanna, a large and ugly type of monitor lizard. Goodness knows how any living things survive in that heat and aridity. There are creekbeds out there that haven't seen water in fifteen years.

The supreme emptiness of Australia, the galling uselessness of such a mass of land, was something it took the country's European settlers a long time to adjust to. Several of the earliest explorers were so convinced that they would encounter mighty river systems, or even an inland sea, that they took boats with them. Thomas Mitchell, a soldier who explored vast tracts of western New South Wales and northern Victoria in the 1830s, dragged two wooden skiffs over three thousand miles of arid scrub without once getting them wet, but refused to the last to give up on them. “Although the boats and their carriage had been of late a great hindrance to us,” he wrote with a touch of understatement after his third expedition, “I was very unwilling to abandon such useful appendages to an exploring party.”

Reading accounts of early forays, it is clear that the first explorers were often ludicrously out of their depths. In 1802, in one of the earliest expeditions, Lieutenant Francis Barrallier described a temperature of 82.5°F as “suffocating.” We can reasonably presume that he was recently arrived in the country. His men tried for days without success to hunt kangaroos before it occurred to them that they might stalk the creatures more effectively if they first removed



their bright red coats. In seven weeks they covered just 130 miles, an average of about 1.5 miles a day.

In expedition after expedition the leaders seemed willfully, almost comically, unable to provision themselves sensibly. In 1817 John Oxley, the surveyor-general, led a five-month expedition to explore the Lachlan and Macquarie Rivers and took only one hundred rounds of ammunition—less than one shot a day from a single gun—and hardly any spare horseshoes or nails. The incompetence of the early explorers was a matter of abiding fascination for the Aborigines, who often came to watch. “Our perplexities afforded them an inexhaustible fund of merriment and derision,” wrote one chronicler glumly.

It was into this tradition of haplessness that Burke and Wills improvidently stepped in 1860. They are far and away the most famous of Australian explorers, the antipodean equivalents of Lewis and Clark, which is perhaps a little curious since their expedition accomplished almost nothing, cost a fortune, and ended in tragedy.

Their assignment was straightforward: to find a route from the south coast at Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the far north. Melbourne, at that time much larger than Sydney, was one of the most important cities in the British empire, and yet one of the most isolated. To get a message to London and receive a reply took a third of a year, sometimes more. In the 1850s the Philosophical Institute of Victoria decided to promote an expedition to find a way through the “ghastly blank,” as the interior was poetically known, which would allow the establishment of a telegraph line to connect Australia first to the East Indies and onward to the world.

They chose as leader an Irish police officer named Robert O’Hara Burke, who had never seen real outback, was famous for his ability to get lost even in inhabited areas, and knew nothing of exploration or science. The surveyor was a young English doctor named William John Wills, whose principal qualifications seem to have been a respectable background and a willingness to go. On the plus side, however, they both had outstanding beards.

Although by this time expeditions into the interior were hardly a novelty, this one particularly caught the popular imagination. Tens of thousands of people lined the route out of Melbourne when, on August 19, 1860, the Great Northern Exploration Expedition set off. The party was so immense and unwieldy that it took



from early morning until 4:00 P.M. just to get it moving. Among the items Burke had deemed necessary for the expedition were a Chinese gong, a stationery cabinet, a heavy wooden table with matching stools, and grooming equipment, in the words of the historian Glen McLaren, “of sufficient quality to prepare and present his horses and camels for an Agricultural Society show.”

Almost at once the men began to squabble. Within days, six of the party had resigned, and the road to Menindee was littered with provisions they decided they didn’t need, including fifteen hundred pounds (let me just repeat that: fifteen hundred *pounds*) of sugar. They did almost everything wrong. Against advice, they timed the trip so that they would do most of the hardest traveling at the height of summer.

With such a burden it took them almost two months to traverse the four hundred miles of well-trodden track to Menindee; a letter from Melbourne normally covered the same ground in two weeks. At Menindee they availed themselves of the modest comforts of Maidens Hotel, rested their horses and reorganized their provisions, and on October 19 set off into a blank ghastlier than they could ever have imagined. Ahead of them lay twelve hundred miles of murderous ground. It was the last time that anyone in the outside world would see Burke and Wills alive.

Progress through the desert was difficult and slow. By December, when they arrived at a place called Cooper’s Creek, just over the Queensland border, they had progressed only four hundred miles. In exasperation Burke decided to take three men—Wills, Charles Gray, and John King—and make a dash for the gulf. By traveling light he calculated that he could be there and back in two months. He left four men to maintain the base camp, with instructions to wait three months for them in case they were delayed.

The going was much tougher than they had expected. Daytime temperatures regularly rose to over 140°F. It took them two months rather than one to cross the interior, and their arrival, when at last it came, was something of an anticlimax: a belt of mangroves along the shore kept them from reaching, or even seeing, the sea. Still, they had successfully completed the first crossing of the continent. Unfortunately they had also eaten two-thirds of their supplies.

The upshot is that they ran out of food on the return trip and nearly starved. To their consternation, Charles Gray, the fittest



of the party, dropped dead one day. Ragged and half delirious, the three remaining men pushed on. Finally, on the evening of April 21, 1861, they stumbled into base camp to discover that the men they had left behind, after waiting four months, had departed only that day. On a coolibah tree was carved the message:

DIG
3 FT. N.W.
APR. 21 1861

They dug and found some meager rations and a message telling them what was already painfully evident—that the base party had given up and departed. Desolate and exhausted, they ate and turned in. In the morning they wrote a message announcing their safe return and carefully buried it in the cache—so carefully, in fact, that when a member of the base party returned that day to have one last look, he had no way of telling that they had made it back and had now gone again. Had he known, he would have found them not far away plodding over rocky ground in the impossible hope of reaching a police outpost 150 miles away at a place called Mt. Hopeless.

Burke and Wills died in the desert, far short of Mt. Hopeless. King was saved by Aborigines, who nursed him for two months until he was rescued by a search party.

Back in Melbourne, meanwhile, everyone was still awaiting a triumphal return of the heroic band, so news of the fiasco struck like a thunderbolt. “The entire company of explorers has been dissipated out of being,” the *Age* newspaper of Melbourne reported with frank astonishment. “Some are dead, some are on their way back, one has come to Melbourne, and another has made his way to Adelaide. . . . The whole expedition appears to have been one prolonged blunder throughout.”

When the final tally was taken, the cost of the entire undertaking, including the search to recover Burke’s and Wills’s bodies, came to almost £60,000, more than Stanley had spent in Africa to achieve far more.

EVEN NOW, THE EMPTINESS of so much of Australia is startling. The landscape we passed through was officially only “semidesert,”



but it was as barren an expanse as I had ever seen. Every twenty or twenty-five kilometers there would be a dirt track and a lonely mailbox signaling an unseen sheep or cattle station. Once a light truck flew past in a bouncing hell-for-leather fashion, spraying us with gravelly dinks and a coating of red dust that went on for half a mile, but the only other lively thing was the endless shaking flubbity-dubbing of the axles over the corduroy road. By the time we reached White Cliffs, in midafternoon, we felt as if we had spent the day in a cement mixer.

Today it is all but impossible to believe that White Cliffs, a small blotch of habitations under a hard clear sky, was once a boomtown, with a population of nearly 4,500, a hospital, a newspaper, a library, and a busy core of general stores, hotels, restaurants, brothels, and gaming houses. Today downtown White Cliffs consists of a pub, a launderette, an opal shop, and a grocery/café/gas station. The permanent population is about 80. They exist in a listless world of heat and dust. If you were looking for people with the tolerance and fortitude to colonize Mars, this would be the place to come.

Because of the heat, most houses in town are burrowed into the faces of the two bleached hills from which the town takes its name. The most ambitious of these dwellings, and the principal magnet for the relatively few tourists who venture this far, is the Dug-Out Underground Motel, a twenty-six-room complex cut deep into the rocks on the side of Smith's Hill. Wandering through its network of rocky tunnels was like stepping into an early James Bond movie, in one of those subterranean complexes where the loyal minions of SMERSH are preparing to take over the world by melting Antarctica or hijacking the White House with the aid of a giant magnet. The attraction of burrowing into the hillside is immediately evident when you step inside—a constant year-round temperature of sixty-seven degrees. The rooms were very nice and quite normal except that the walls and ceilings were cavelike and windowless. When the lights were off, the darkness and silence were total.

I don't know how much money you would have to give me to persuade me to settle in White Cliffs—something in the low zillions, I suppose—but that evening as we sat on the motel's lofty garden terrace with Leon Hornby, the proprietor, drinking beer and watching the evening slink in, I realized that my fee might be



marginally negotiable. I was about to ask Leon—a city man by birth and, I would have guessed, inclination—what possessed him and his pleasant wife, Marge, to stay in this godforsaken outpost where even a run to the supermarket means a six-hour round-trip over a rutted dirt highway, but before I could speak a remarkable thing happened. Kangaroos hopped into the expansive foreground and began grazing picturesquely, and the sun plonked onto the horizon, like a stage prop lowered on a wire, and the towering western skies before us spread with color in a hundred layered shades—glowing pinks, deep purples, careless banners of pure crimson—all on a scale that you cannot imagine, for there was not a scrap of intrusion in the forty miles of visible desert that lay between us and the far horizon. It was the most extraordinarily vivid sunset I believe I have ever seen.

“I came up here thirty years ago to build reservoirs on the sheep stations,” Leon said, as if anticipating my question, “and never expected to stay, but somehow the place gets to you. I’d find these sunsets hard to give up, for one thing.”

I nodded as he got up to answer a ringing phone.

“Used to be even nicer, once, a long time ago,” Lisa said. “There’s been a lot of overgrazing.”

“Here or all over?”

“All over—well, nearly. In the 1890s there was a really bad drought. They say the land’s never really recovered, and probably never will.”

LATER, STEVE, TREVOR, AND I went down the hill to the White Cliffs Hotel, the local hostelry, and the appeal of the little town became more evident still. The White Cliffs was as nice a pub as I have ever been in. Not to look at, for Australian country pubs are nearly always austere and utilitarian places, with linoleum floors, laminated surfaces, and glass-doored coolers, but for the happy atmosphere. Much of this is a tribute to the owner, Graham Wellings, a chipper man with a firm handshake, a matinee-idol hairstyle, and a knack for making you feel as if he settled here in the hope that one day someone like you would drop by.

I asked him what had brought him to White Cliffs. “I was an itinerant sheep shearer,” he said. “Came here in ’59 to shear sheep and just never left. It was a lot more remote back then. Took us



eight hours from Broken Hill, the roads were that bad. You can do it in three now, but back then the roads were rough as guts every inch of the way. We tumbled in here gasping for a cold beer, and of course there were no coolers in those days. Beer was room temperature—and room temperature was 110 degrees. No air-conditioning either, of course. No electricity at all, unless you had your own generator.”

“So when did you get electricity in White Cliffs?”

He thought for an instant. “Nineteen ninety-three.”

I thought I had misheard him. “When?”

“Just about five years ago. We have telly now, too,” he added suddenly and enthusiastically. “Got that two years ago.”

He seized a remote-control unit and pointed it at a television mounted on the wall. When it warmed to life, he ran through their choice of three channels, turning to us at each with an expression that invited staggered admiration. I have been in countries where people still ride wagons and gather hay with forks, and countries where the per capita gross domestic product would not buy you a weekend at a Holiday Inn, but nowhere before had I been invited to regard television as a marvel.

He switched off and put the remote back on the shelf as if it were a treasured relic.

“Yeah, it was a different world,” he said musingly.

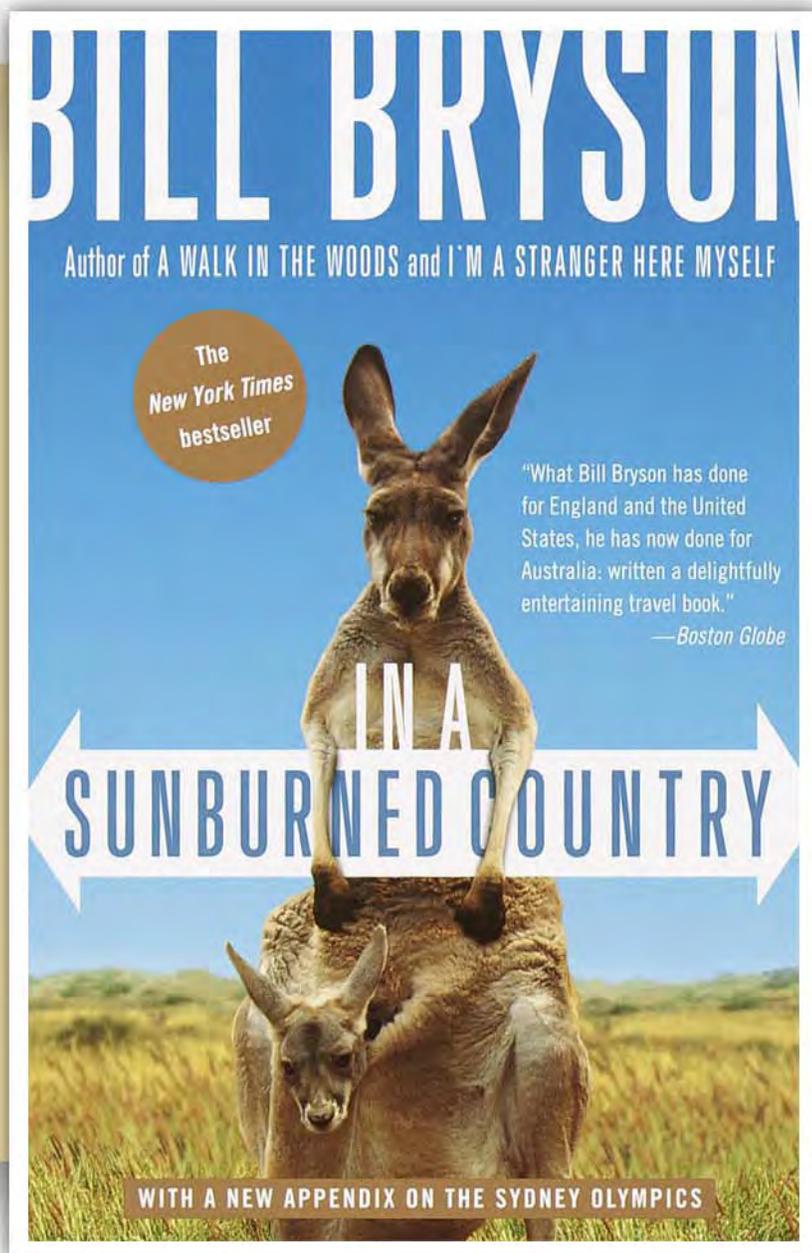
Still is, I thought.



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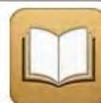


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