

## **Australians Abroad: Narrative Paths and Divagations**

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Travel is a great provider of defining moments. The dislocation and hiatus in routine provide opportunities to reassess oneself and others, exposing fissures in what previously appeared self-evident and crystallizing new insights. Australia is a nation of travellers, with over eight million international departures by residents in the year ending June 2012,<sup>1</sup> from a population of some 22 million (ABS 2012a). Although commonly characterized as an immigrant nation, it has been shaped just as importantly by the overseas journeys of its people, and the liminal experiences such travel has provided have not only been self-defining and defining of the Other, but at times nation-defining.

Histories of Australia may have focused on travel *to* its shores ('discovery,' invasion/settlement, transportation, migration), but travel *from* Australia has long been a significant phenomenon. From Yolngu people accompanying Macassan fisherman to today's traditional owners repatriating Aboriginal remains from overseas museums, from those First Fleeters who made the return journey 'home' to Europe, to today's travellers, tourists and expatriates, residents of Australia have left its shores for a multitude of destinations and reasons and in very different roles. Traders and sailors, descendants of migrants and refugees, soldiers, nurses, artists, authors, brides, chaperones, utopians, sportspeople, students, teachers, hippies, backpackers, cruise

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<sup>1</sup> Figures for July 2011–June 2012 from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show eight million Australian residents departing short-term and 368,800 permanent and long-term departures by residents (ABS 2012b). The figures have more than doubled in the decade since the then Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer characterized Australia as a nation of travellers (Downer 2002).

travellers, journalists, corporate executives, trailing spouses: some have sought to rejoin family, others to escape it; some have sought renown, others oblivion. Most citizens are likely to be Australians abroad at some time in our lives, whether fleetingly, repeatedly or indefinitely, willingly or unwillingly.

The relationship to Australia is thrown into relief by travel, identity cast under the spotlight gaze of the other. For some, feelings of Australianness increase in a foreign landscape, others claim to find a spiritual home abroad, and such contradictory affiliations may co-exist. Any simple either/or binary of identities is complicated in the kaleidoscope of shifting identifications that occur in the day-to-day negotiation of life when familiar points of reference fail. As David McCooey notes *à propos* of Hal Porter and Japan: 'selves crossing cultures are complex entities. Subject positions are not fixed or even simply repetitive' (2002: 69). And the return of the traveller is often to a changed nation, a social landscape transformed during one's absence or understood differently as a result of the voyage.

Accounts of Australians abroad are multifarious, but in the unruly tapestry of comings and goings, patterns emerge. Patterns of purpose are tied to particular destinations in particular periods, and perceptions follow suit, shaped by gender, class and age. The most celebrated cluster of Australians Abroad are perhaps the intellectuals and artists drawn to London in the 1960s in pursuit of opportunities and recognition (Alomes 1999; Britain 1997), often spurred by the cultural cringe and content to be fleeing what was perceived as an intellectual wasteland. A markedly different pattern emerges among Australians travelling to the Soviet Union in the interwar years, whose motives were generally political (Fitzpatrick 2008). More than a few were 'pilgrims' (Pesman 1996: 139), determined to find the socialist ideal they had projected; confirmation of expectations is cloaked as discovery in these traveller's reports. Similarly over-determined by destination is the recent proliferation of memoirs of life in France. There is a tendency among these authors, overwhelmingly middle class Australian women, to project rather different ideals: community on a small scale (Genoni 2007), an idealized femininity, a new French self (de Nooy 2012).

Sonia Harford (2006) underlines the temporal specificity of the cultural cringe, contrasting it with the motives and stories of today's expats, in particular young professionals who consider themselves to be leaving rather than attaining paradise in

moving abroad. But utopian or hellish, the destination is still defined in relation to an imagined point of departure. Thus Katharine Susannah Prichard found in 1930s Russia the worker's paradise lacking in Australia (McNair 2000). Thus the 21<sup>st</sup> century sojourner finds in Paris the refinement missing in the Antipodes (Holdforth 2004).

Clusters of travellers give rise to narrative patterns which solidify into templates, the narrative equivalent of the beaten track. But while some travellers are content to pursue a well-worn storyline, others reconfigure commonplaces, forge new narrative paths. The articles that follow highlight both discursive grooves and off-piste accounts that challenge the patterns.

In the wake of the February 2011 'Australians Abroad' conference at the University of Queensland, this special issue of *Portal* proposes a multidisciplinary analysis of Australian travellers and expatriates past and present: the reasons for and destinations of their travel, its impact on their identity, the roles they play, their writings and reflections, their linguistic and intercultural competence. The travel scrutinized spans over a century, from 1898 to the present day, and includes destinations across four continents. There are short trips but also decisions to stay abroad indefinitely. Some of the travellers are writers although none are primarily travel writers. But if travel writing is incidental to their output, it is not incidental to the evolution of their identity.

The order of the papers is roughly chronological and reflects the broadening of Australian travel opportunities and choices since the time of Federation. The papers fall into two groups, complemented by a creative piece. The first four papers discuss travel to Europe—Britain, 'the continent,' Italy, Russia—in the first half of the twentieth century, prior to the age of jet travel. Several of the travellers are literary figures; others are tourists whose diaries have been preserved. The other three papers discuss Australians exploring wider horizons from the middle of the century onwards: 1960s expeditions to Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Algeria and the USA, current expatriate life in Japan, and contemporary trips to Belgium, Malaysia and Turkey. There are no literary figures among these travellers, but activists, teachers and students. Finally, a creative work—a narrative poetry sequence—evokes the struggle to belong of a present-day Australian in The Hague.

Kevin Meethan has critiqued an overemphasis in tourism studies on ‘the normative and controlling elements involved in tourism production,’ the way in which destinations are pre-conceived and experiences are pre-digested for tourist consumption, resulting in ‘a tendency to downplay the practical accomplishments of creating meaning’ (2006: 5). In contrast, the emphasis in the present collection of essays is resolutely on the travellers’ active engagement in the experience and the consequences of their negotiation of existing discourses. For even those who follow a template invest it with personal significance.

Richard White’s essay is exemplary in this regard. He sifts through the accounts of ordinary Australians of their trips to Europe from the turn of the century to the 1970s, and analyses their relationship to Britain by focusing on their responses to the history they found or recognized there. In one sense their reactions rehearse stereotypes: the remnants of British history are found to be picturesque, quaint and venerable. The British past is reassuring in comparison with that of continental Europe, seen as altogether racier: dashing, dramatic, and sensual. But although these reactions are clearly shaped by clichés, White also shows the ways in which the tourists actively generate meanings by interpreting travel experiences through the lens of their own past, through specific childhood memories of schooldays and fragments of books read. These moments of personal identification not only infuse the relation to Britain with emotion but have the capacity to transform the relation to Australia. White points to those who returned to Australia determined to find and cherish a local past, previously seen as not sufficiently ennobled by the passage of time.

White finds no simple binary or unidirectional shift in the identifications of the travellers in his corpus, writing that ‘Travel complicates any simple teleologies from Britishness to Australianness,’ a point developed in the following two essays. Between them, Meg Tasker’s and Lucy Sussex’s papers contrast the experiences of three literary figures: Randolph Bedford and Louise Mack travelled to London to advance their careers in 1901, three years after Arthur Maquarie. All three also spent a considerable amount of time in Italy. In comparing Mack’s and Maquarie’s quite disparate experiences abroad, Tasker writes against the binary between radical nationalist and cosmopolitan identities. Instead she argues for a ‘transnational colonial identity,’ whereby apparently incompatible affiliations—national, colonial, imperial,

cosmopolitan—coexist in a fluid multilayered fashion, variously brought to the fore by situation, resisting the imperative to assert a single one definitively. Gender and finances positioned Mack and Maquarie differently, but a hybrid and mutable positioning of identity enabled each to communicate with readerships spanning the globe, and to explain and mediate the relationship between Antipodeans and Londoners. Sussex similarly traces Bedford's multiple identifications: on the one hand proudly Australian, and profoundly rejecting England (despite his literary successes there), simultaneously in love with Italy and feeling at home there, despite no ancestral links. These are not conflicting attachments, for what binds Bedford to Italy is, paradoxically, recognition in its landscape of an Australian aesthetic.

John McNair draws attention to a different configuration of travel—Australians to the Soviet Union—in order to focus on the account of a voyage that challenges the template in a number of ways. P. L. Travers, creator of *Mary Poppins*, had already made her home in Britain when she travelled to Moscow, and explicitly distances herself from Australia in her narration of the 'excursion.' And her story is written against the genre discussed by Pesman (1996: 139) and Fitzpatrick (2008), not only in its rejection of the official tour and discourse, but in its literary devices and in the speaking positions adopted. In her self-portrayal as a flippant and frivolous truant from the tour, Travers sets herself apart from her fellow travellers. And in its use of humour, irony and whimsy, along with the evocation of fantasy and magic, the book breaks the mould and prefigures *Mary Poppins*, published a few months later.

McNair cites Travers on the importance of speaking Russian in order to see Russia 'properly,' even though she doesn't speak it herself. Mary Besemeres has noted that '[o]nly a fraction of travel books in English ... emphasise the language borders that are crossed in much international travel, and deal in a sustained way with the question of how language impinges on the self' (2008: 245). More broadly, Michael Cronin has remarked on the '[i]ndifference to the question of language in many of the key texts on writing and travel that have been published over the last two decades' (2000: 2). While communicating in a foreign language is not neglected in the essays in this special issue—its effects being raised by both Jon Piccini and Roslyn Appleby—it only takes centre stage in Amelia Walker's poetic sequence (in the Cultural Works section of the issue), which emphasizes the mediation of identity through language. 'I, Migrant?'

voices the struggles of an expatriate Australian in the Netherlands, determined to avoid the Anglophone ghetto and its exaggerated national contours, but reduced to baby talk and illiteracy without it. Simultaneously identifying with and rejecting the expatriate community, the protagonist evokes the narrowing of her options, the loss of purpose that accompanies her loss of identity. A common language—broken Dutch—finally finds her a mooring point among workers in an Asian food court, ‘not home, but the idea of home—any home.’

The Soviet pilgrimage tale eschewed by P. L. Travers also serves as a point of contrast for the later narratives analysed in Jon Piccini’s essay. Piccini analyses the accounts of three overseas trips of an overtly political nature—those of Brian Laver and other young radicals to Eastern Europe in 1968, of Denis Freney to Algeria in the early 1960s, and of five Indigenous activists to a Black Power conference in Atlanta in 1970—travellers not inclined simply to toe the party line or parrot official views. The travels were in each case transformative, not only on a personal level, but in the critical use of global ideas to change local Australian contexts on their return, the translation ranging from new forms of activism to the development of community aid organizations. Piccini uses the accounts of these trips and their lingering effects to argue against Victor Turner’s conception of the liminality of travel as a fleeting and ultimately inconsequential state or experience.

The final two essays take us to present-day Australians abroad and the negotiation of discourses that attempt to homogenize the experiences of Australians in particular places. Roslyn Appleby has interviewed Australian men living and working in Japan as English language teachers. Her focus is not on their descriptions of Japan, but rather on the stereotyping of this group of expatriates, and the ways in which they position themselves in relation to media discourses. Their Australian identity is mediated through the lens of the other, and white masculinity finds itself under threat. The interviewees are keen to dissociate themselves from the unsavoury image and low status of the single white male English language instructor. Marriage to a Japanese spouse is perceived as the path to a respectable masculine identity and to professional advancement, and Appleby highlights the marginalization of those who refuse the heteronormative solution. Like the Antipodean writers struggling for status in London a

century earlier, burdened by the image of the colonial, these Australians in Japan are dogged by a caricature.

Jim McKay argues that Australian tourists to Gallipoli are also cast as stock characters, but this time from within Australia. He writes against those who see the increasing popularity of battlefield tourism as a symptom of the militarization of Australian history and culture, and against the notion that visitors to memorial sites passively consume media discourses and government rhetoric. Instead, he argues, we need to examine the myriad expectations and experiences of such travellers. Echoing Meethan's critique quoted earlier, he sees a need to focus on the ways in which we negotiate official rhetoric, the ways in which students and teachers, for example, engage with educational resources on Anzac history. Three case studies of travel by groups of high school students—to the grave in Belgium of an Aboriginal World War I digger, to Ranau and Sandakan POW camps in Borneo, to Gallipoli—highlight the intercultural learning, the interpersonal and intellectual connections made possible by the excursions. Here student assumptions are challenged through the embodied experience of travel and the engagement with history. The case studies problematize Anzac myths and the idea that they are accepted unquestioningly. McKay's article is timely in the lead-up to the Anzac Centenary, the Australian government debating the practicalities of a quota on travellers to the 2015 commemoration at Gallipoli as this issue goes to press. McKay's point that 'Australians constantly reconfigure Anzac myths' is alluded to in the cover photograph for this issue, which features Turkish, Australian and New Zealand surf boat crews at Anzac Cove in Turkey, and whose motives and experiences we would be foolish to consolidate.

Literary, historical and sociological, the contributions to this issue highlight patterns and peculiarities in the shaping of Australian identities at different sites of border crossing in a variety of historical and social contexts. In the opening paragraph of this essay I suggested that travel provides defining moments, and the articles and poetry that follow pinpoint such moments in the lives and musing of the diverse travellers past and present that they investigate. The defining, however, comes as much from others as from the travellers themselves; simultaneous with the sudden burst of clarity and insight on the traveller's part is the inevitability of being labelled and judged as they travel. In the

processes of transnationalization afforded by travel, the Australian abroad necessarily remains an identity in transit.

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