

A LETTER FROM DOWN UNDER

Toto Walker

Editor: A month or so ago, I picked up the phone and called Toto at his home in Sydney to ask him to send us a word from his part of the world. As you read the following letter you will see that he has not lost the talents which he used so well as writer-photographer for The National Geographic. See story and photos in 1990's Summer Newsletter.

Dear Bob:

Thank you for your telephone call from Florida on April 14, even if it did shatter my life of idle ease.

At your suggestion I am writing a letter from Sydney. It has two parts separated by half a century: 1) Australia in the early 1940s as a background to 2) Australia in the 1990s.

* * *

On a breezy May morning in 1941, I first saw the land I'd call home one day. Saw it from the deck of the Monterey (remember the old Matson Line?), after a three week, island stopping voyage across the Pacific.

Here was Australia, an island continent with an area almost as big as the United States but with a population smaller than New York City.

Rolling with the waves through two massive headlands, the Monterey entered "the finest harbor in the world, in which a thousand sail in line might ride in perfect security". So said Capt. Arthur Phillip of the English Navy. But that was a good century and a half before three midget Japanese submarines sneaked into the harbor, bringing World War II explosively to Sydney.

Our harbor pilot felt his way among ferries, freighters, barges, yachts and warships to berth the 20,000 ton Monterey virtually at Sydney's front door.

Even with an awesome array of photographic equipment for National Geographic assignments, I cleared the Customs with unexpected celerity. If I hadn't been a white person, though, I couldn't have entered the country. The White Australia Policy, introduced in 1901, prohibited the immigration of non-white peoples, especially Asians and South Sea Islanders. The increasing numbers of these cheap labor immigrants had been taking jobs formerly filled by Australians at higher wages.

By 1941 Australia was 90% white and 98% British. At that time the descendants of the Aborigines, who had lived here at least 40,000 years before the white invasion, were vaguely estimated to number between

SAME GUY??



USAF Commissioned War Correspondent — Australia 1942



"On assignment — Arnhem Land Australia — 1948



Assistant editor - National Geographic, Washington, D.C. — 1970

50,000 and 60,000. They weren't seriously counted because they didn't count. The White Australia Policy had no reference to the black fellows.

What sparked the white man's occupation of this faraway land was the American Revolution. That war of inconvenience for England meant that the Brits had to find some place other than America to dump their excess prisoners. So these unwanted subjects were diverted to Australia, the east coast of which Capt. James Cook had claimed for England in 1770.

Under the command of Capt. Arthur Phillip, the first fleet of 11 ships with 778 convicts aboard reached Botany Bay, just south of today's Sydney, on January 18, 1788. Only six days later, Comte de la Perouse showed up with two ships, seeking likely spots for French settlement, but found the British already there. A disenchanted Perouse departed, complaining that Capt. Cook had left few of the world's coastlines for others to explore.

Australians have immortalized the French explorer's frustration with two lines:

"La Perouse sailed into Botany Bay,
Cried merde alors and sailed away."

Captain Phillip moved his fleet from hot and thirsty Botany Bay to a far more salubrious haven up the coast. Here Sydney was born in a well-sheltered cove, one of the countless along the harbor's 180-mile shoreline.

Around Sydney Cove with its Circular Quay, Australia's first city took shape somewhat casually. By 1941 at least a million people lived as close to the harbor as they could get. The city maintained a low profile; buildings were limited to a height of 150 feet. Except the Harbor Bridge.

This colossal steel bridge, known archly as the "coat hanger", spanned the harbor to link Sydney with its northern suburbs. Before its completion in 1932, many commuters relied exclusively on ferries fanning out from Circular Quay. Many still do.

Sydney seemed to me friendly and easy-going. It had the expectant atmosphere of a big country town on market day. Walking along the city streets, I exchanged greetings with people I'd never seen before. I had pleasant chats with strangers over tea or a schooner of beer. A young woman journalist told me she had heard of "Hale and Yarvard, too." Australians still spoke of England as home.

More than two thirds of the nation's seven million people lived and worked in urban areas of the south-

eastern and southwestern seaboard. Yet the nation really looked to the outback for its greatest rewards.

Economically, Australia rode on the sheep's back. Wool production was the country's No. 1 industry. Some 120 million sheep—17 for every person—supplied more than a quarter of the world's requirements. By comparison there were 13 million cattle. With 14 million acres of wheat fields the country ranked fourth in world wheat production.

Discovery of gold in 1851 attracted thousands of immigrants, including large numbers of Chinese. Mining also produced an abundance of coal and iron ore as well as silver, lead, zinc, tin and copper. Natural oil sources had been explored but not yet exploited.

Transportation still had, literally, a long way to go in this big country. Railway gauges varied from state to state, necessitating a change of trains at borders. All too many main roads remained unpaved. But with ideal flying weather and natural landing fields the airways developed rapidly. So did military air bases.

As the nation revved up its war effort after Pearl Harbor, it turned to the United States, rather than Britain for support against possible Japanese invasion. Shipload after shipload of U. S. Forces began arriving, heartily welcomed in Sydney and elsewhere in Australia. Later, of course, came the sardonic reference to the Yanks: "overpaid, oversexed, and over here."

One young American soldier, who acquired a couple of complete koala-bear skins, took them to a taxidermist.

"Do you want them mounted?" asked the taxidermist.

"Well" said the Yank, "since they're a present for my mother-in-law, it might be better just to have them shaking hands."

As a war correspondent, I spent a lot of time with the U. S. Air force operating from Australia. Eventually I received a direct commission in the Fifth Air Force and moved to New Guinea.

* * *

Half a century later I'm writing you from my home in Australia. As you may remember, Bob, I live in a small house over-looking a thickly wooded park. It's remarkably quiet for a place barely three miles from the center of Sydney.

Downtown Sydney is, I think, trying to look like downtown New York. Its crowded skyline has well overcome the 150 foot barrier; office buildings and hotels rise higher than the once prominent bridge. What's more, the Opera House, completed in 1973, has stolen the bridge's thunder as a tourist attraction.

Seemingly afloat at Sydney Cove, the Opera House, its gleaming white walls shaped like billowing sails, enhance the maritime scene. Out of nautical context, it has been described as "a huddle of nuns in a high wind."

Sydney is the main gateway for immigrants. Thanks to them the city's population has trebled since the 1940s, and is racing toward the four million mark. At the same time the nation's total has more than doubled to 18 1/2 million.

Threat of enemy invasion had underlined the national slogan, "populate or perish." Not long after World War II, Asians as well as other people of all shades and creeds were pouring into Australia by the thousands. The White Australia Policy had died a natural death.

But the Aborigines had to wait another 20 years after the burial of that racist policy to receive citizenship with the right to vote in their own native country. Since then they have been drifting from the harsh hinterland to the more desirable coastal areas around Sydney, from which the early white settlers had driven their people.

Aborigines currently number 305,000. Some have distinguished themselves in sports, painting, literature and even in politics. Too many of them, however, are having a pretty rough time: Squalid living conditions, poor diet, too much booze, too little work, disease, too little incentive to stay alive. Life expectancy of a black fellow falls 20 years short of the white man's. Among Abos sent to jail—usually young men—there's a distressing rate of suicide. Bloody sad—as sad as the saga of America's Indians.

In the 1990s, however, the natives have begun to fight for their rights. Pastoral leases, generally held by white people, extend over 42 percent of Australia. A pastoral lease is essentially rented Crown Land. In 1992 the High Court decided Aborigines could be the owners of the Crown Land on which their people had always lived—this was called native title.

The National Farmers' Federation maintained that pastoral leases extinguished native title, but last December the High Court held that pastoral leases did not necessarily extinguish native title.

So the black and white conflict, dating from 1788, goes on and on. Sure, they coexist, but reconciliation remains elusive. On the other hand, immigration proceeds peacefully and, within reason, indiscriminately. Last year Australia welcomed 92,510 migrants from all over the world. They have settled so thickly in Sydney's western suburbs that the demographic center of the metropolis has shifted ten miles in their direction from Sydney Cove.

Immigrants had added spice to Australia's less than adventurous approach to food. They have inspired keener interest in the arts and languages; they have contributed colorfully to the international atmosphere.

They also play an admirable part in the cultivation of expanding vineyards, and in the production of excellent wines—altogether a noble achievement in this land of the long-time beer monopoly. It's enough to make a brewer take to wine. A lot of Australians are making the switch.

The catch of attracting so many immigrants, though, is that there are not enough jobs to go around. At the moment, unemployment idles at 8.7 percent.

Related concerns include the soaring cost of living, illegal drugs, corrupt police, more crime and violence. Traffic is so chaotic that I gave my car away while I was still ahead (meaning alive). Now I walk to market with a rucksack, taking my chances at street crossings.

How many immigrants from the United States are living in Australia? Roughly 20,000—a pretty small figure among other nationalities. Yet America's influence is pervasive. Australians imitate Americans in every-day ways: speech (slang), clothes (Brooks Bros. style, even to button down shirts), business methods (to the point of importing managing directors for leading companies). Dollars and cents have replaced pounds, shillings and pence. An Australian dollar is worth about 78 cents U.S. Many Australians won't leave home without their American Express cards.

Baseball and basketball are popular. So is bourbon. Nearly everyone, it seems, wears a Yankee-style baseball cap. McDonald's restaurants everywhere... everywhere.

A pity, though, that the traditional "bloke" is losing out to the new "guy". The old guard particularly resents the Americanization of the language—a slur on the mother tongue, sir.

No one can blame America for the weather that brought an end to the adoration of the lamb. Australia no longer rides on the sheep's back.

Devastating drought forced sheep farmers to get rid of their flocks and try their luck in cropping and cattle. They ventured mainly into wheat and cotton before gambling on cattle. They did well too, helping to bring the nation's cattle count to 26 1/2 million—double that of the 1940s.

Today the leading rural industries are the mining of coal, iron ore and gold; also silver-lead, bauxite, uranium, zinc, copper and diamonds.

Oil is gushing from wells off the northwest coast of the continent, and in the Bass Strait between the mainland and the island state of Tasmania in the south.

As to transport, uniform railway gauges now link the capitals of the five mainland states. A Greyhound bus system operates throughout the continent. Road trains—huge trucks towing several trailers—haul livestock and freight; they supplement, if not replace, railways in the outback.

Back in Sydney I asked the retired chairman of a large paint company what he considered the predominant issues in Australia. He mentioned the following:

- 1) Land rights (aborigines versus white leaseholders)
- 2) Unemployment
- 3) Republicanism (instead of constitutional monarchy)
- 4) Law and order
- 5) Immigration
- 6) Environment

"What about finance?" I asked. "What about it?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "the enormous foreign debt, for example."

"Nobody worries about it," he said.

"Do you know how much the debt is?" I asked.

"No," he replied, "It's not an issue."

I really don't think he intended to paint over it.

When I asked his brother, also a retired businessman, which issues concerned him most, he put the foreign debt at the head of the list.

So how much is the foreign debt? Approximately U.S. \$157,036,000,000.

Discussing the endangered environment with neighbors, I asked, "What do you believe is the most serious aspect of it?"

"People," said a woman.

Of course. Silly question, Walker.

Well on to vanishing species and dwindling bird life. Possums haven't been coming to my veranda for the past two years. And I no longer hear the sweet song of the European blackbird in my suburb of Woollahra.

Anyway, it is reassuring to know that the shy long-snouted barred bandicoot is coming back to the mainland after 70 secluded years on two little islands off the west coast of Australia.

Cheers, Bob,

Toto



Four lovely Class "Associates"—Lorna Shinn, Marian Green, Naomi Reik and Rita Ludlum—with Lenchen Townend at 64th Reunion Class Dinner