

Peter Conrad

THE SECOND DISCOVERY OF AUSTRALIA

A lecture delivered as the Colin Roderick Lecture for James Cook University at Townsville and Cairns in June 1999 by Peter Conrad, at the invitation of The Foundation for Australian Literary Studies and the School of Humanities.

I begin with a piece of news which will not surprise you, as you scope out my creased and jet-lagged figure, though it was a shock to me: I turned fifty last year. When that happens, you begin to look over your shoulder, and what I see when I do that is Australia, which I left in 1968 to go to Oxford. (Having arrived there, I smoked dope with my fellow Rhodes Scholar Bill Clinton and helped him to burn the American flag during Vietnam protests. That, however, is another story—and it is also not true. I might add that my old friend Peter Pierce, during his own time as a Rhodes Scholar a few years later, had to make do with pouring beer into the incorruptible and still very slim Kim Beazley. This at least is true.)

As a student at Oxford, I found to my dismay that my love of English literature did not guarantee admission to English society. Did I even have the right to reside inside those books which I thought of as my adoptive home? Once, in the college beer cellar, I quoted Oscar Wilde to a muddy oaf who had just come back from feeding the college's pack of beagles. Hunting, I told him, was the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable. He might very well have hit me, but instead he did something more wounding. He snorted, and said "Bloody colonials—coming over here and quoting our literature at us."

But if you live long enough, the wheel of time brings in reverses and revenges, which is why I quite enjoy my seniority. I saw that same fellow the other day: he now teaches at an Oxford college which is younger, poorer and less distinguished than mine. He wanted my help and advice because his son, currently reading Chinese at Oxford, was determined to realise a millennial dream: he wants to spend this New Year in Sydney. Where better to see the first dawn than in the oldest, youngest country on earth, the last unspoiled place? Thirty years ago, this boy's father warned me that I had no entitlement to Oscar Wilde. Now the boy himself was reading Patrick White and preparing to reverse the hopeful journey I had made, exchanging the weary, wintry northern hemisphere for the pristine south. He is one of very, very many. Australia has become a tantalising object of desire for countries which once ignored it, or loftily condescended to it. The outcome is satisfactory, yet there

are dangers too. My talk this evening will be about the pleasures and the risks of this geographical upheaval.

Australia began as an imperial amenity: a tip for human refuse. Once the sanitary disposal area was closed, the British lost interest. Charles Darwin, visiting briefly on the *Beagle* in 1836, walked around Sydney congratulating himself on being "born an Englishman," because the city testified to "the power of the British nation." When he looked beyond the Georgian sandstone village, he winced. He disliked the miserably thin pasture and the "extreme uniformity of the vegetation," just as Mark Twain lamented the bleak prospect of a country populated exclusively by the lower orders. Darwin railed at the obstinacy of the Aborigines, who refused to be civilised. Why didn't they build houses, or "take the trouble of tending a flock of sheep?" His most perverse complaint concerned Australian evergreens. He pitied Australians for not being able to witness "the first bursting into full foliage" of a deciduous tree. It did not matter to him that this momentary spectacle had to be paid for by the penance of a denuded, fluey winter.

Setting out across the Tasman Sea, Darwin remarked "we were all glad to leave New Zealand." He was no less glad to leave Australia, which he did "without sorrow or regret." As he left, he gave the infantile country a patronising pat on the head: "Farewell, Australia! You are a rising child, and doubtless some day will reign a great princess in the South; but you are too great and ambitious for affection, yet not great enough for respect." The phrasing, however, admits his unease and intimidation: Australia even then was "too great and ambitious" to accept his love—as if a bronzed Bondi siren had laughed at the inept advances of a nerdy Brit.

For more than a century, the British continued to bolster their self-esteem by ridiculing Australia. In the early 1960s the director Michael Powell—who made *The Red Shoes* and, much later, that torrid, humid dream of tropical sexuality *Age of Consent*, set in Queensland—attempted to film *They're a Weird Mob*. He had to wait, because Gregory Peck, bizarrely enough, had optioned the book. Could Peck, as wooden as a cigar-store Indian, have seen himself as the ebullient, Mediterranean Nino Culotta? The option expired because, as Peck told Powell, "in Hollywood they've never even heard of Australia." It was at best a location for terminating the world: Peck himself had recently made *On the Beach* in Melbourne. Finally in 1966 Powell organised the finance. He felt obliged to introduce Australia to audiences elsewhere, so the film begins with a jeering essay on indigenous manners. A narrator describes Australia as "a nation of sportsmen," as we watch incompetent hunters staggering through the bush, firing at one another or puncturing beer cans. We eavesdrop on a dispute between punters at a race track. "They call this English," sighs the narrator.

Worst of all is a choral anthem, "It's a man's country," intoned as Nino's migrant ship steams across the harbour to dock in Circular Quay. I had to rewind the video several times before I caught all the words, and when I did I wasn't sure I believed them. This, apparently, is the national creed, voiced by a thousand invisible baritone versions of Chesty Bond, the athlete in the singlet whom I so much hated when I was growing up—

There are many manly things that must be done.
A man's gotta prove he's a man.
Wear your shorts, bare your chest, get a tan, build a barbecue.
It's a man's country, sweetheart,
From the chain marks on its ankles right up to its short back and sides.

It is a brutish fascist manifesto: the Hitler Youth might have marched to such a tune. But as Nino reaches King's bloody Cross, Powell nastily disparages the ideology of brawn. A quick survey of Cross nightclubs shows what has become of women in this masculine land. In a dressing room at Les Girls, a peroxidized dolly preens and frizzes her beehive in front of a mirror. Then the spurious girl reaches for an electric razor to shave her jaw. In the man's country, the women are also men. The national myth, Powell prematurely concludes, is a hypocritical lie.

Australia's fate, in this view, is inversion. Powell's *They're a Weird Mob* begins with a montage of Sydney scenes projected upside down. "Australians live down under," comments the narrator. "Like flies on the ceiling," he adds, "they never fall off." Nice to think that we were credited back then with the sticky-legged agility of filthy domestic insects. How things have changed! "Down under" has recently acquired a new and more attractive meaning. Earlier this year, Channel 4 in England produced a jazzy serial called *Queer as Folk*, narrating the erotic tribulations of some gay men in Manchester. One of the characters, Vince, a spotty and unprepossessing supermarket manager, incredibly bags a handsome, affluent Australian boyfriend, Cameron. When he shows off his catch in a bar, an effeminate friend flaps an admiring wrist: "Ooh, Australia, nice—down under—didgeridoos—all sorts of possibilities." Down under is no longer a topsy-turvy place for castaways. It is the name of an erogenous zone. Just last month, Richard Tognetti's Australian Chamber Orchestra played a concert in London. The reviewer sent by *The Times* salivated when he saw the players bound on stage, "shirts hanging loose, with ready smiles," and enviously remarked that "they made some of our chamber bands sound like embalmers, waxing the music for its funeral." England, we are to understand, is moribund, while Australia sexily swings.

No wonder that Vince in *Queer as Folk*, with his pimply British complexion, his oily unwashed hair and his meagre physique, suffers from a sense of

unworthiness. He wonders why Cameron bothers with him. "I mean," he says, "I can't be the best shag he's ever had. *He's Australian!*" Have we ever been paid a better compliment? After spending time down under, we are not on top, envied and lusted after by all. The former colonials now do the colonising, in bed and out of it. Cameron is an accountant, owns his own house, buys Vince a car, and even teases him with brochures advertising a trip to—of all places—Melbourne. Vince, presumably, is not good-looking enough to be presentable in Sydney.

In April, during the transmission of *Queer as Folk*, Prince Charles reminisced during a visit to Manchester Grammar School about his teenage blooding at Geelong Grammar. Just as Nino in *They're a Weird Mob* has to smile with patient incomprehension while being called a dago, a drongo, not fair dinkum and a new Australian, Charles remembered with rueful stoicism being mocked as a Pommie bastard, and described a weekend in which he was sent on a sixty-mile hike which involved climbing a peak called Mount Buggery. Bastardising and buggery—these are the initiation rites laid on for neophytes in the man's country.

Charles's future subjects now travel to Australia in quest of ultimate experiences like those he shyly recalled. The advertising agencies are the myth-makers of our time, and they have been hard at work in London over the past year transforming Australian holidays into existential journeys, adventures in self-transformation or perhaps self-destruction. For the price of an air fare and a few associated tours, you can be Patrick White's Voss, testing yourself against the void, the vacuum or the steep drop, venturing into a continental heart which is not dead but seething with freakish energy. The television campaign for one travel firm tells a series of short, therapeutic stories. We see British visitors frolicking or vegging out in the usual Australian resorts. Then a phrase is flashed onto the screen: the invidious nickname they were given, before they made this life-changing expedition, by their friends and workmates back in Britain. A man gleefully bungee-jumps off a cliff in the Blue Mountains. He is then identified as Scaredy Cat. Another man fries in sensual stupor on a beach. He used to be known as Workaholic. Someone else plunges into a pool beside a waterfall, allowing a gang of Aboriginal kids to submerge him. The caption tags him as Control Freak. And, in the wittiest of these little parables, a young woman in an empty landscape leans on the windscreen of an open jeep and stares in rapture at a distant revelation. A moment later, we see what she is transfixed by: Ayers Rock. The silence sings around her. Then comes her label, which she has now, with the healing, calming assistance of the outback, lived down. She is, or used to be, Chatterbox. Like a Wordsworthian mystic, she has been subdued to quietness by the contemplation of Australian nature, so much more sublimely untamed than the domesticated scenery of the English Lakes.

The catch-phrase which unifies all these case histories takes up the down-under idea and gives it an ingenious twist. We are given a word to ponder, a brand name which is also a sacred polysyllable: Australia. The phrase which is intended to catch the customers follows: "Discover the other side of yourself." Not, any longer, the underside, the hindquarters of the globe, its *derrière*, as unsightly as a monkey's rump. Australia offers the chance of acquaintance with your other side, your true but secret self. The continent's promise is a Jungian excursion to the dark side of the moon, or the head.

The advertising fiction has already begun to spill over into fact. This April, the 11 year old daughter of the British Prime Minister had a couple of near-ultimate experiences during and just after an Australian holiday. *The Times* headlined its report "Kathryn Blair's latest big adventure," alluding to Peter Pan's notion that death must be "an awfully big adventure." First a jetski in which she was riding capsized on the Gold Coast during a tropical storm, and she had to be hauled out of a canal at Sorrento. A few days later, on her way home to sedate, temperate England, the 747 in which she was travelling struck clear-air turbulence outside Singapore and dropped into a gulf of empty air a thousand feet deep. An Australian priest, credited with being Tony Blair's spiritual mentor, issued a statement from his home at Merrijig in Victoria. Kathryn, he said, "had a more adventurous holiday than she bargained for."

I am glad she survived to tell both tales. Still I worry about this influx of passionate pilgrims in quest of lost childhoods, or petit-bourgeois drones—like those in the television commercials—hoping that the bush will turn them into Iron Johns. Australia began as Britain's rubbish dump. Then, when Menzies permitted the testing of British atomic weapons in the desert, it turned into a lab for rehearsing the apocalypse. Is it any more honourable to be a sanatorium for the neurotic inmates of those over-crowded, imploding islands?

We need to be on guard against a new race of colonisers, who don't want to annex land but to imaginatively appropriate our landscape and its resident gods. Bruce Chatwin, celebrating Aboriginal folklore in *The Songlines*, was the first of them. He went to Central Australia looking for "the most abstract desert I could find anywhere." Of course the desert is only abstract—featureless, a red blank—if you don't look at it closely. Get to know it, and you find that it seethes with life and covert fertility. Chatwin didn't stay long enough to see beyond the pre-imagined abstraction. A manic collector of countries and ideas, a sexual tourist whose casual lays were latter-day imperial conquests, Chatwin always had his eye on the next stop, and for that reason found it hard to focus on what was in front of him. Murray Bail once took him to the Blue Mountains to see that vertiginous hole in the ground. Chatwin glanced at the view as if clicking a camera, then announced to Bail "This time next week I'll be at the

base camp of Everest." Salman Rushdie, who travelled through the Northern Territory with Chatwin, made an arrogant, impudent virtue out of his own high-speed passage through the region. "Shanghai! Montevideo! Alice Springs!" sighs the narrator of Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*. He goes on to justify this rapid itinerary by asking a rhetorical question: "Do you know that places only yield up their secrets, their most profound mysteries, to those who are just passing through?" Perhaps this instamatic creed is forgivable as the stir-crazy fantasy of a man under house arrest in the scruffy London suburb of Crouch End; all the same it is simply untrue. Imagine how contemptuous Rushdie would be if one of us said the same of Bombay or Calcutta.

Chatwin presumed that he could do a crash course in the "profound mysteries" of Aboriginal religion by working through the files left by the anthropologist Theodor Strehlow. But for all his awe and enthusiasm, he simply unpacked the baggage of cultural expectations he brought with him. He called the character who guides him through the lineal maze Arkady, wishfully transforming Australia into an idyllic English Arcadia. Less poetically, he likened the songlines with their tangled trails of kinship to spaghetti. Could he have been remembering the road system of Birmingham, where he grew up? On the outskirts of that city, there's a notorious looping mess of overlaid highways, known to the locals as Spaghetti Junction.

Most plaintively British of all is Chatwin's reverie about the country's sacred name: "In my childhood I never heard the word 'Australia' without calling to mind the fumes of the eucalyptus inhaler and an incessant red country populated by sheep." The eucalyptus inhaler evokes that pinched and suffocating northern-hemisphere ailment, sinusitis. The other image is simply wrong. Australia does indeed have many woolly citizens, but they need to graze, so the country where they congregate tends to be green, not red. Chatwin is more at home in literary pastoral than on a farm.

Incidentally, it's curious that Chatwin, like the inventors of the "other side of yourself" campaign, derived such delight from enunciating and savouring "the word 'Australia'." This may be one more symptom of a changed balance of power, because the British are increasingly shame-faced about naming their own country. First of all, they no longer know what to call it. The Celtic fringes are seceding from the shaky amalgam known as Britain, and the United Kingdom—no longer united, and probably destined to stop being a kingdom—is sliding into membership of a European federation. British corporations nervously swallow the national adjective. British Airways banned the flag from its tail-fins, replacing the Union Jack with ethnic daubs (including a mimicry of Aboriginal painting), while British Petroleum, British Gas and British Telecom have covered their embarrassment by using only initials. Britishness is a self-

love which no longer dares to speak its name. Those suffering through such an identity crisis naturally envy the confidence of a country which not only has an entire continent to itself, but also knows what it is called.

In 1983, four years before the publication of *The Songlines*, the German director Werner Herzog went to Coober Pedy to film his own account of tribal mysteries, *Where the Green Ants Dream*. The Aborigines resist the incursions of a mining company, which wants to churn up one of their dream sites. In court they establish their title to the terrain by producing a tjuringa they have exhumed—a home-made sceptre, the repository of their ancestral claim. At least this occult object remains out of sight; Herzog turns his camera away from it. Chatwin, a chatterbox who was not silenced by the desert, briskly interviewed Aborigines, unable to comprehend the occult and secretive nature of their society. There is a similar menacing hint of spoliation in Rushdie's comment on the way that places like Alice Springs "yield up their secrets." A yield is a profit, forcibly tugged from the earth. The colonisers used to want Australia's minerals or its primary produce. Now, employing the same violent and negligent methods of extraction, they have come back to plunder our myths.

Until the End of the World, a futuristic road movie directed by Wim Wenders in 1990, digresses through Europe, meanders across Asia, touches down in Coober Pedy and then concludes in the Kimberleys. It's not quite as global as it looks: the role of Moscow is played by a derelict Art Deco cinema in the centre of Lisbon. Nor, when the film reaches Australia, is location shooting any guarantee of authenticity. The concern of *Until the End of the World* is our culture of mesmeric images, which has weakened our attachment to reality. As in those television commercials I described, a fiction about Australia replaces the inconvenient facts of the country. William Hurt and Max von Sydow play a father and son who are struggling to perfect a technique for beaming images directly into the brain of Jeanne Moreau, Hurt's mother and von Sydow's wife. Those images by-pass her eyes, because she is blind: the point seems to be that the images we crave and consume today are mental narcotics or sexual spells, no longer the signatures of actual, visible things.

For some reason, this experiment is conducted inside a cavernous bunker in the Kimberleys, but the characters pay no attention to the salty, sulphurous desert outside, or to the undulating, ochre-coloured cliffs. Addicts of the image, they are resident in Plato's cave, a recess of illusion, not in actual Australia. When he first went to Coober Pedy, Wenders found that Plato's cave was constructed above ground after nightfall. In the darkness, the sky became a theatre, and people lined up in their cars at the drive-in to watch the deluding play of images. On his next visit to Coober Pedy six years later, the drive-in had dematerialised. Plato's cave had gone back underground, where it belongs:

below the sand was the air-conditioned vault of a video shop. The Europeans and Americans in *Until the End of the World* are beached in Australia, and—after a nuclear blast in the other, contentious hemisphere—they spend their time brooding about worlds elsewhere. The narrator, Sam Neill, says that they are frustrated because they don't know which cities have burned, or even whether their old world still exists. Wenders himself shared this anxiety, and could hardly concentrate on his work in the Kimberleys late in 1989 because his thoughts kept winging their way back to Berlin, where in his absence the Wall had been breached.

"It's the end of the world," sighs the heroine, Solveig Dommartin. Her remark echoes the complaint of Ava Gardner, made thirty years before while filming *On the Beach*. Melbourne, Gardner said in slurred alcoholic tones, was the ideal place for making a film about the end of the world. Again, as with the down-under image, a change has occurred. Gardner's offscreen comment was a curse on dreary, wowserish Melbourne; Dommartin's line, uttered in the outback, is a blissful salutation. She does not particularly mind the failure of all electromagnetic circuits and the imminent cloud of radiation. The world began in ancient Australia, so why shouldn't it end here, ushering in a New Age of spiritual transcendence?

And what if the world should decline to end when required? You can always import an image of Armageddon from elsewhere. Herzog's *Where the Green Ants Dream* opens and closes with a preview of nature's revenge, provoked when the green ants are dislodged from the site of their dreaming. This footage looks preposterously unAustralian: in fact it shows a twister careening through Tornado Alley in the American mid-West. Herzog even thanks Texas Tech and the National Severe Storms Laboratory in Oklahoma for loaning videotape. American weather is volatile, liable to such fits of bad temper; the weather in the Australian outback, as Herzog should have noticed, is sullen, glowering, fierce and yet equable, not given to American dramatisations of force. At least our world should be allowed to end in the way which is natural to it—seared and scorched by the sun, not lashed and shredded by winds. A tornado would do little harm in the outback, because there are no tacky trailer parks for it to demolish. In his script, Herzog calls the retributive storm Tracy, evoking the hurricane which flattened Darwin in 1974. He may not have realised how far Darwin is from Coober Pedy, where such meteorological tantrums are unknown.

There is an intolerable conceit to the notion of Australia promulgated by these apocalyptic tourists. Wenders first entered the country in Darwin, having crossed from Indonesia. He claims to have had no preconceptions: for him the whole continent was "ein weisses Stück Papier"—a sheet of white paper, like the

"tabula rasa" to which Locke compared the infant mind. Because the continent for him was empty, uninscribed by images, he felt free to do anything to it, make anything happen in it. But the blank was in Wenders' head, not in Australia; like Rushdie, he had simply made a virtue out of his own lack of information, and his unwillingness to acquire it. You can see the attraction, for a German born in 1945, of imagining a country with an unwritten or erased history. The Australian outback, however, is no such place, and Wenders might at least have acknowledged the actual colour of the landscape by calling the continent a sheet of crimson or orange or oxidised red paper.

Late in *Until the End of the World*, there is a spasm of remorse. The Aboriginal helpers at von Sydow's laboratory down tools and wander off. They object to the battery of video contraptions—substitutes for seeing—which have been trained on them and their landscape. "You think we want you walking through our dreamings with your fancy cameras?" their leader demands. Wenders here accuses himself. On an excursion to Ayers Rock, he tramped about in the blistering heat, hauling along with him a Japanese panoramic camera which weighed as much as a suitcase packed with boulders. The Aborigines, he remembers, considered him a madman. Perhaps they underestimated the threat he and the other new discoverers of Australia represented. Imperialism today conducts its assault with cameras, not gunboats; annexation is achieved by framing and capturing an image, which stills life as suddenly as a bullet. And, as the tribal spokesman in the film rightly says, the Australian images which the rest of the world wants to appropriate are those beneath the surface of the baked earth or inside the heads of those who are rooted in that soil.

Advertising, the industry which manufactures myths, again tells a true lie about this insidious process. Another small fable appeared on British television this year. It began with a gliding aerial view of the Queensland coast—fuzzy mangrove swamps, and white, blinding beaches—accompanied by the lulling drone of a didgeridoo. A somnolent, smiling face then appeared. After that, words slid into view, transforming the images into a sales pitch. The first phrase announced that "The average person dreams only two hours per night," then added a qualification—"except in Qantas Business Class." Finally the product, responsible for the beatific expression of the businessman, was identified: "The Qantas Dreamtime Seat," a recliner which allegedly lowers you into that subliminal stratum when you press a lever. I am torn between admiration for the poetic ingenuity of this and indignation at its cheek. A well-fed snooze while cruising between international engagements is not exactly what the Aborigines mean by Dreamtime. And, come to think of it, how many tribal people do you see in Business Class on Qantas?

We should be on guard against those who want to colonise Australia's dream. If we are not careful, there will soon be no difference between the earthy

dreaming of the Aborigines and the so-called American dream, that magic formula which convinces the credulous that their most mercenary and vainglorious fantasies will come true if they just wish upon a star.

Let me tell you a story to illustrate what I mean. The other day in England I wrote a newspaper article about a revival of the industrial musical *The Pyjama Game*. I asked the director, Simon Callow, how come the British were now so good at singing, dancing and pretending to be brash, bold Americans on stage. In reply, he mentioned the Equity ban on imported talent, and said that the locals had been forced to develop musical-comedy talents. Nowadays, Callow said, you could cast any musical with British thespians. I then remembered the National Theatre's great revival of *Oklahoma!* last year, which indeed found its mid-Westerners at home—except that the hero Curly was played by Hugh Jackman from Perth, whose preparation for the role included belting out “Waltzing Matilda” at the Melbourne Cup. Somehow it seemed inevitable. Could you imagine a British actor in cowboy boots and chaps, casually strolling on to open the show by singing “Oh what a beautiful morning”? The very sentiment of the song is un-British. And Curly later has to take his shirt off and flex waxed pecs, which comes more easily to Australians than to pigeon-chested Brits. Callow, intrigued by my point, even found some extra evidence for it. As he recalled, the Curly in the previous London revival of *Oklahoma!* was also an Australian, John Diedrich. He drew a startling conclusion: “Australians,” he said, “are the new Americans.”

There are plenty of these new Americans on view—for instance the two Australian actors, Guy Pearce and Russell Crowe, who slip so easily into the skins of American cops in Curtis Hanson's 1996 film *L.A. Confidential*. Pearce and Crowe were happy to be given such a break, but there is no reason for the rest of us to be obsequiously grateful on their behalf. Hanson cast them, he has explained, because they were nonentities. Their faces were like the white sheet of paper which, for Wenders, made up the invisible map of Australia: audiences had “no emotional history” with Pearce or Crowe. Hanson colonially subjugated them with the help of photography. Before filming began, he sent two out-of-date black-and-white studio portraits to Australia, telling Pearce to model himself on a long-forgotten actor called Guy Madison and instructing Crowe to become the reincarnation of Aldo Ray.

Perhaps the casting of Pearce and Crowe seemed plausible to Hanson because *L.A. Confidential* is set in the 1950s, and Americans today view Australia—fondly, enviously, and insultingly—as a prelapsarian version of the United States, preserved by innocence and isolation. It is a lucrative fiction, because it attracts consignments of sedate mid-Western retirees to this once fatal shore, where they expect to be revisiting Eisenhower's America. This traffic in deceptive images is encouraged by the Australian curator Patrick McCaughey

in his essay on "The American-Australian Experience". (a hyphenated hybrid), printed in the catalogue for *New Worlds from Old*, an exhibition of nineteenth-century Australian and American landscape paintings, seen in Canberra and Melbourne last year, then in Washington early in 1999. McCaughey's piece is a tourist promotion in the guise of art history, and it entices the mid-Westerners with their synthetic pastels and their video cameras by assuring them that what they will find, if they come to Australia, is the America of their infancy. He encourages a side trip to Melbourne, where "the streets are safe and clean" and "well-maintained parkland provides a ... garden-like experience." Carlton and Fitzroy can be visited with impunity, because "the older, inner-city residential areas have been almost universally gentrified," while "the impoverished and dangerous ghetto is uncommon." All this, and no need to struggle with a foreign language! Peter Carey spun the same yarn in his contribution to a folio of travel propaganda distributed with *The New Yorker* last year. He charmed paranoid Manhattanites, who send their children to school in taxis and schedule play dates by telephone, by telling them how his young son can roam unsupervised through the dusty streets of Bacchus Marsh in Victoria. The 1950s, however, look better in hindsight, especially if seen from another continent: Carey himself lives in New York.

Australia itself has been bribed to impersonate America. In the dopey television series *Flipper*, Queensland pretends to be Florida—safer and cleaner than the original, as McCaughey says of Melbourne, but above all cheaper, with a few local beach boys hired to play foreigners in their own country. I congratulate Queensland on having lost *Baywatch*, which planned to hire Avalon on the Gold Coast as a cut-price Santa Monica (though apparently the negotiations were merely a ploy, meant to extort a better deal from Hawaii, where this lewd and ludicrous series has now moved). McCaughey plaintively confesses the longing of Australian artists and writers "to be recognised in America," and prays that "the opening of the American mind" might occur as a result of the exhibition. So far as I know, that mind has stayed resolutely shut: if Americans know nothing of Australia, it's because they happen to be the most provincial people in the world, myopically incapable of seeing beyond their borders—unless, of course, they can be lured into touring ersatz Americas. It embarrassed me a little to read a review of *New Worlds from Old* in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last year. The piece was headlined "Big Brother is Watching Us," meaning that this exhibition of colonial art had persuaded America to colonise Australian culture. The phrase itself colonised Orwell's motto from 1984 and ignored its warning. Freedom, autonomy and privacy involve escaping the totalitarian scrutiny of Big Brother. In the Sydney paper, the baleful phrase became a childish outcry of glee and gratification that our existence had been noticed and validated overseas. I wish we were not so ready to roll over and stick our legs up in the air in the hope that our bellies will be scratched.

Still, I suppose it is vaguely flattering that everyone wants to be an honorary Australian now. I'll end with a quaint anecdote which sums up the inadvertent, accident-ridden comedy of this geopolitical shift. In London in 1996 I went to a chamber music concert at the Wigmore Hall. The Brodsky Quartet—whose members, despite the Russian name of their group, are dumpy-looking Mancunians—was accompanied by a favourite singer of mine, the Swedish mezzo Anne Sofie von Otter. To my delight, the programme contained a piece the quartet had commissioned from Peter Sculthorpe, one more of the many notable Peters turned out by tiny Tasmania. Its title, stroking the same buzzword which helps Qantas to sell its recliners, was *Island Dreaming*. The classical string players from Manchester did their best to imitate Aboriginal instruments, while Anne Sofie von Otter, an arctic and patrician blonde, vocalised a tribal incantation and sang a refrain about rowing out to the edge of a reef. When I looked in the programme, I found that the words supposedly came from “the Tallest Straight Islands north of Australia.” I speculated briefly about where these tall, straight islands might be, and what they looked like—presumably they resembled von Otter, who is a six-footer with immaculate posture and spikily upright hair. Then I realised that Tallest Straight was a misprint for Torres Strait, just off Cape York. Perhaps a fax had copied faintly, or the writer of the programme notes had telephoned Sculthorpe in Australia on a crackly line and could not decipher his accent.

Someone at the Wigmore Hall was dozing, if not actually dreaming. The absurdity of the error, and the fact that no-one had spotted it, reveal how ill-informed these northern fantasies about Australia still are. That is our protection, and may prove to be our salvation. We are currently fashionable and sexily saleable, if only because the tour operators have exhausted all other destinations, while the New Agers, after sampling all other available belief systems, fancy adopting a Stone Age religion. The vogue won't last, and while it does we should not be too keen to accommodate the expectations of those who, like Rushdie in Alice Springs, are “just passing through.” Who wants to be a new American, let alone a quaintly retro old one, like Pearce with his brilliantined quiff and Crowe with his crewcut in *L.A. Confidential*? It is enough that we are now allowed to be ourselves. We will still be here when the blow-ins have gone home. Or rather, you will—for I have to include myself, more's the pity, among the blow-ins. At least, unlike Darwin, I always leave Australia with sorrow and aching regret.

