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Austrophobes in a lost world

PERSPECTIVE

By D. R. BURNS

AUSTROPHOBIA is a state of mind increasingly common among writers who feel called upon to offer a "critique" of Australian society. The critique is intendedly an intellectual statement but amounts, in fact, to a prophetic calling down of the wrath of History upon the "ugly Australians", denizens of the new Gomorrah.

The critique is invariably a catalogue of vices, in the manner made famous by Savonarola. It does not call upon the people to repent however. One of the author's aims is usually to make it quite clear that Australians are beyond all hope of salvation. The critique expresses total abhorrence; the tone is often quite threatening.

Total abhorrence equals total involvement. The Austrophobe is clearly attached to the country in a way which others who don't share his total feeling are not. He is the partner of an unhappy and indissoluble marriage. He can't, as it were, keep his hands off the thighs which he loves to hate stroking (or vice versa). Thus the late Robin Boyd describes his last book, *The great, great Australian dream*, as a "cry of despair for Australia and an hysterical joke about it". By contrast, there are those among us who can't understand why Australia, as such, should cause emotions of either despair or hysteria.

Granted this emotional excess, I want to draw attention to the sorts of intellectual excess which derive from Austrophobia. My source works are *The great Australian stupor* by Dr Ronald Conway; *The great, great Australian dream*; an article, *The alien antipodes* by Dr Allan Healy in *Meanjin*, number 2, 1972; and two articles in the *Review* of June 24, 1972, *The suckling society* by Humphrey McQueen and *The ugly Australians* by Geoffrey Kenihan.

Austrophobia is, in part, a state of self delusion. The Austrophobe, sees himself as stating the unpalatable truth in this totally conformist country, where all self-criticism is eschewed. "In Britain", writes Dr Healy, "the need for criticism is understood. In Australia it is deprecated and critics are likely to be made whipping boys." This statement appears in an article written at the invitation of the editor of Australia's most heavily, governmentally subsidised organ of opinion. Add to this that *The great Australian stupor*, work which splits the Australian male apart from the crutch and, indeed, from the ankles upward, has sold 20,000 copies in a country where a first work by a promising novelist might possibly sell 3000.

Dr Healy is, of course, not discussing a state of things, but a stereotype. Put otherwise, he is reading off the terms of an agreed upon definition. For "Australian" read, among other listed characteristics ("racist", "materialistically minded", etc.), "hates all forms of self criticism".

A second aspect of Austrophobia is that it arises, like Marie Antoinette's attitude to the peasants, out of a class bias. It is anti working class. Thus Robin Boyd, objecting to David Wilson's comment upon another Austrophobic document, John Hallows' book, *The dreamtime society*. Wilson comments that "the Australian intellectual's dislike of the common man lurks in the background of Hallows book". Boyd comes out punching. "In Australia", he complains, "the intellectual is expected to do more than just feel compassion and goodwill for the blokes in the public bar. He is asked to push right up to the bar with them and actually converse with them about the things in which they are interested."

One can't miss here the note of patronage, ("compassion"), or of irritation (all the way through, but particularly in the "actually"). The Austrophobe's objection is not only to the working class, but also to those things which one associates with working class blokes — the drinking of beer in large quantities as example.

It is Boyd again who states that "an Australian identity is all too real and apparent to ... the world conscious Australian. It comes to him with a protruding beer belly and a receding brain". Vino, the drink of the educated middle class man, is much less sugar ridden and belly swelling of course. This statement about beer bellies was made by the architect of Melbourne's largest and most populous wine bar.

In the same vein, the *Review*, an occasionally Austrophobic journal, features on its front cover of June 24, as a graphic advertisement for Humphrey McQueen's middle page spread on *The suckling society*, a low-browed gorilla doing his sucking from a can of beer. It would be quite self-contradictory to show the typical denizen of McQueen's teat orientated society folding his lips about a bottle of Mount Pleasant, or a flagon of Leo Buring, or any one of the other choice drops recommended in the *Review*'s weekly column for wine buffs.

This anti working class bias is rampant in the most Austrophobic of all documents. This is not an article or a work of sociology but a novel by a great writer. It is *Riders in the chariot*, written, of course, by Patrick White. Himmelfarb, one of the "riders", the spiritual visionaries, escapes death in a German extermination camp for Jews and comes to Australia. There he is strung up in mock execution by "Blue" and his mates, who work at the bicycle lamp factory on the outskirts of Sydney. He dies from humiliation as much as anything else. Blue and his mates undertake this heinous act because they have won "the lottery" and are "as full as piss ants". Blue is as proletarian as the front bar of The Bells, Darling Harbor.

In *The great Australian stupor*, Dr Conway, looking back to other days, refers to "the extraordinarily acrid and vindictive response of many of the unemployed to the state and commonwealth relief measures of the Depression years". For, as Dr Conway notes, "very few Australians starved in the Depression"!! (my exclamation marks). "Bitter though the years were, humiliating as the prospect of the sustenance wage was, to workers with several mouths to feed, other nations

suffered far more." As the Warsaw Jew said to the Budapest freedom fighter (my comment).

One very peculiar aspect of Austrophobia is the tendency to state as fact what is, quite obviously, not fact. It is, for example, not a fact, that intellectuals in Australia are expected to push right up to the public bar etc. There is, again, Boyd's statement that "one does not expect Americans to come to live here". The fact is that one does expect Americans to come to live here, as they do in increasing numbers. I understand that the revised version of John Gunther's *Inside Australia* estimates the number of Americans who want to do that as around five million.

Another confident assertion of what is quite simply non-fact is Humphrey McQueen's statement that, as a result of the secular education acts of the 1880s Australian school children "were cut off from probably the one remaining area of critical Anglo-Saxon culture — its literature". The fact is that they weren't. English literature is the one compulsory subject right through the New South Wales secondary curriculum. In other states it is compulsory at least to the end of the fifth year.

Again, Humphrey McQueen informs us that "we have inherited the worst aspects of triumphant capitalism". It is my own considered opinion that we have inherited the best aspects of triumphant capitalism. I add that I am, by nature, hedonistic and work shy, and these subjective factors quite possibly play a part in the making of my value judgment.

An especially curious feature of Austrophobia is the rather old-fashioned terminology the Austrophobe uses and the slightly dated nature of his pre-occupations. Thus Dr Conway is worried about "the dance floor gyrations" of young Australians, particularly "the practice of hopping about, pelvis locked to pelvis". Am I anatomically on the wrong wavelength? I would have thought that pelvis-locking belonged in the era of the slow foxtrot and the modern waltz, when Dr Conway and I, with separate sheilas of course, got what satisfaction we could on the dance floor at Leggett's, because the pill hadn't been invented and girls weren't so ready to come across.

This Austrophobic concern with yesterday is found in the *Review*'s use of the old-fashioned word "poofter", to describe a male homosexual. It was the *Review* which chose as illustrative panels to Humphrey McQueen's centre page spread (or sprawl, according to taste) an extract from something written by Manning Clark in 1943 and an equally, or even more tired, extract from Patrick White's silly little piece, published in 1957 in *Australian letters*. To state, as White does there, that in Australia food means "steak and cake" is hopelessly misleading about the dietary habits of present day Australians. Reference, the main dining room menu of the South Sydney Rugby Leagues Club any night of the week.

Dr Conway makes it clear just how least the Australian is, sexually speaking. "Consulting room practice", he informs us, "suggests that male sexual activity declines more rapidly with age here than anywhere else in the world." And you don't get any better rating on the universal sex-scale if you happen to be a poofter, or "camp", to use Dr Conway's old-fashioned term. As he assures us: "More reserved homosexuals who have travelled widely inform me that the Australian 'camp' is far more loud, vicious and shrewish than its European or Asian counterparts."

Nor dost thou, oh Antipodean, escape by being a little child whatever Jesus Christ might have had to say about that state. For, according to Robin Boyd: "The sound of children at play, which has a certain innocent tinkle — no matter what they may be actually playing — everywhere else in the world, has a peculiarly harsh, rasping note in Australia."

This leastness of all things Australian is discovered by the Austrophobe in the course of his obsessive searching out of English attitudes towards things Australian. This obsession has a perfectly honorable ancestry. It derives from an older, more straightforwardly colonial view of things. In Martin Boyd's novel *The Montfords* (1928), there is the Australian who lives in Florence and explains: "It gives me a sort of British nationality. If I meet any one I don't tell them I'm an Australian until I have made a reasonably good impression. Then they say, 'Oh, I should never have thought so', and imagine they are paying me a compliment, and the tiresome part of it is that in a way they are."

This is the sort of attitude which led Arthur Phillips to coin the term, "the cultural cringe". The peculiarity is that, whereas the cringe in its older form was a snuggling up to Britannia's breast in the hope of drawing forth the milk of mother love, in the present it is a desire to suck upon the sources of rejection.

It is, however, increasingly difficult for the Austrophobe to discover in England substantial draughts of the stuff which nurtures self-contempt. For, as Michael Beloff notes in *Encounter*, January 1972, in the course of his trip to Australia: "Certainly Australia has shed in English eyes its recent image of an ineffably dowdy province, (with) its intellectuals marooned in a waste of beaches and tennis courts. That myth survives only as a means of making money for the emigre satirists of *OZ* and *Private eye*." He omits any mention of Richard Neville's weekly column in the *Evening standard*. Perhaps he has successfully made the effort to put it quite out of his mind.

There are three further aspects of the Austrophobic state of mind which call for mention. One is the Austrophobe's conviction, not merely that, on any cultural score at all, Australia belongs at the bottom of the barrel, but that actually it has no place inside the barrel at all.

Germaine Greer returns to inform the natives that the Australian habit of the old man slipping a middy to the wife in the front seat of the Falcon and then edging back to the boys in the front bar is a joke "all over the world". And the natives gain a slightly forlorn sense of satisfaction, knowing that their separatist drinking habits have at least created a sense of unity among the people of Chandrapore, Medicine Hat and Piddle

Hinton, have helped them to remember they are all members of the one world which spreads as far south as the tip of Cape York peninsula.

The really eerie part is still to come. Austrophobia extends to the conviction that being an Australian means not being quite real. There is the human race. And there is us. Something of this is conveyed in Robin Boyd's statement about those Australians who think they belong, "the more sophisticated Australians". "They travel frequently. They know what's going on over there. And many of them deceive themselves into believing they are, like lightly colored negroes, 'passing'." (That's what I mean about Austrophobia involving dated attitudes.) "They spend months at a time in the company of real members of the northern hemisphere ... Yet not far below the surface there is a general mutual unspoken understanding by all concerned that it is only a probationary and honorary membership."

It's something you can't change; it's not even something you can point to or specify, like a skin pigment, or the shape of one's eyes. It's useless looking for it, because it is something you haven't got. As people, so place. Humphrey McQueen puts the point, or rather the non-point succinctly enough: "Australia is not a society in its own right and never can be understood by searching for the truly genuine Australian essence." It's not the not being which worries one so much. It's the knowledge of being that which is not.

What can we do to be saved? Is there any way in? No. The Austrophobe is skilled in high-speed hydraulics. When you head towards what seems a way out, another steel trap clangs shut. Dr Healy notes that the gap between Britain and Australia is widening and "this could be explained ... by the growth of a distinctive Australian identity". This seems cheering, pace McQueen, the notion that we may be going to be real — like people are — sometime in the future. Clang! "It may be", warns Dr Healy, "that this 'distinctive identity' incorporates a die-hard traditionalism which is the real source of alienation." In other words, any attempt to be real by being distinctive, and thus obtaining entrance to The World, will only result in our sliding further away, ceasing to be even plastic mock-ups, becoming ectoplasm.

There are ultimately only two alternatives. One is that we should all cut our throats. But with the present-day shortage of cut-throat razors it is perhaps advisable to take the more verbal and less bloody way out. Typical Austrophobic statements of the sort I have quoted are so wide, general, collective, summarising, all-covering that one can lift them up, turn them inside out, roundabout, back to front, without disturbing the real facts of existence in the slightest.

Take this statement by Robin Boyd: "Australia in fact has no higher total of faults of nature or humanity than any other country but in its isolation it has come to think that it has not nearly so many disadvantages as any other. This one factor causes all the trouble." Erase but one syllable and you have: "Australia in fact has no higher total of faults ... than any other country but in its isolation it has come to think it has not nearly so many advantages as any other. This one factor causes all the trouble." As soon as you've made the switch you begin to feel real, like a person does.

I shall readily admit to the charge of flippancy, but plead, of course, that it was done in self defence. I am quite ready to play the sadist in the privacy of my own home as the scars on the buttocks of my children attest. But I refuse to perform acts of intellectual masochism.