

HOW TO END OUR ISOLATION

Our hunger to hear good of ourselves from outsiders, our hesitation to honour a local product, our devout faith in the Overseas Expert—all our more private self-doubts which make up the unique cultural climate of The Australian Way—all are essentially a product of one condition. Isolation.

The depth of The Cultural Cringe used to be directly proportional to the time taken in sailing out from England. Now that jets have all but demolished the time barrier, it is proportional to the round-the-world air fare. In any case we are still as conscious as ever that we are cut off from normal exchange with colleagues in other countries.

The basis of the Cultural Cringe is not an inferiority complex; We are only too ready to feel superiority if given the least encouragement. It is a doubt complex. We are not members of the World Cultural Club, so we just don't know where we stand in the world picture from one moment to the next. This question of standing may mean nothing to a dedicated artist or scientist, or to any impatient and enterprising young man in any field, but it means a great deal to these who hand out the opportunities. It holds back, to a shocking extent, any Ideas Man in Australia. It drives talented, loyal, but frustrated Australians away from our shores in droves.

The solution is simple. We must cease being isolated.

Even the super-sonic planes of the 'seventies will not move us closer to the hub of our world—to the New York/London/Paris triangle—but without expense we can draw now a large part of the world closer to us. We can waken to the rich field of art and intelligence operating nearby, round the rim of the Pacific. We can make exchanges within a second centre, a potential rival of the Atlantic bloc, the embryonic cultural fellowship of the Pacific.

As we are reminded occasionally by citizens of the Atlantic bloc, the Pacific is still the poor man's culture zone, but at this time it is growing out of the decorated shield and wooden idol class rather rapidly; faster than we are inclined to realise. A rich sampling of the cultures of the globe, old and new, is to be tasted around its shores; from Japan to Mexico, from Hollywood to Surfer's Paradise.

Today we in Australia still look wistfully to Europe for encouragement whenever we achieve something which might perhaps be ranked "in world class". Tomorrow we might do better to discuss it first at the Pacific level.

A sophisticated public, critical but receptive, awaits any example of our work we can send to Japan. Interchange schemes are already working, of course. Trade missions operate both ways. The

Australia-Japan Business Co-operation Committee is planning visits of Australian engineers to Japanese industries, to exchange students, teachers, businessmen, and to encourage Japanese studies in Australia.

"The biggest problem is for Japanese and Australians to get through to get through to each other's minds." This Sir Maurice Mawby, chairman of the committee, was quoted. But who can doubt that the quickest way through to the other man's mind is through the arts? One really successful play, concert or design exhibition can spread the message much wider and more economically than a thousand exchange students can do it with the greatest good will.

The decision to send the Sydney Symphony Orchestra to Tokyo en route to the Commonwealth Arts Festival in London was refreshing. Tokyo enjoyed the visit. Britain really did not. After the cheers of the expatriate Aussies in the London audiences died down the shrivelling voices of English critics could be heard intoning their predictable faint praise: "hardly polished, but beefy"; "unoriginal, but spirited."

In the Pacific area our works have no historical handicap to overcome before they are accepted for their own value.

Any showing of Australia's best in any field could count on a respectful welcome on the West Coast of the U. S. Why must we

wait for visiting movie stars to discover our painting? Why not a show of Australian art in the new, elaborate, but by no means replete Museum of Art in Los Angeles?

The West Coast of the U. S. has never shared the East Coast view that the civilized world enters a nether region across the Mississippi and tumbles over into an abyss of bamboo and cave drawings a few degrees of longitude past Honolulu. The cultivated people of San Francisco, at least, often look beyond the sunset in the hope of finding interesting new soulmates across the ocean.

In an odd way we are drawn by parallel circumstances both to Tokyo and to San Francisco at this time. Although all of us have pride and pleasure in what we are making of the second half of the 20th century, we all experience the feeling of having our original cultural characters rolled flat by the international bulldozer that is made in New York/London/Paris. That's why we need each other's support.

The real advantage to Australia in any exchange of fine art is the broadening of our artistic horizons. But there are practical gains too. Our trade ships and shows and delegations go out to sell our goods the hard way, and do a worthy job. But there can be no doubt that a more distinguished and vital image of Australia as a making and doing country in this part of the world would ultimately, softly

sell more of our goods than many a loud commercial fanfare.

Australia has come to realise with some reluctance that it is, geographically, a part of Asia. Nevertheless, regrettable as it may be, we cannot see much immediate warmth of cultural contact in that direction.

The Pacific region is a different matter. Geo-culturally, we belong there. The Pacific region can be taken as our first horizon when we lift our eyes beyond Australia's own shores. As we grow, our ideas expanding continuously, the Pacific is the logical first place to look for international exchange in intellectual and artistic matters.

I do not mean to be advocating a semi-political cultural bloc in opposition to the Atlantic one, nor, Heaven forbid, a fiesta of Polynesian bamboo and Kon-tikiism. But a great deal of mutual strength and stimulation and confidence could be gained all round by better communication and harder competition on the modern creative level between the peoples bordering this ocean.

Professional and artistic organisations of all kinds could do much more in encouraging exchanges. The Pacific zone is not so forbidding, nor so far out of our class, that Australia could not take a leading role in sponsoring closer association.

Australia and California already have, of course, many historical as well as geographical ties. The climate and the countryside, the yellow-ochre grass and sparse trees, the verandas and the post and rail fences, all bring a sense of deja vu to an Australian in the gold-rush country of the Sierra Nevadas. The farm houses, the silos, the little old two storey shops on the dusty-edged main street of a country town—upper floors cantilevered forward on shaped brackets: we have seen it all before at home.

Most of these things were built 80 to 100 years ago and have hardly changed since. In those days we had much in common. Many of the people who were disappointed in California after 1849 came to the Australian gold-fields after 1851, bringing their empirical techniques of carpentry along with their prospecting pans.

No emotional strain is involved in imagining ourselves part of a Pacific fellowship (few will object to their sister marrying a Canadian or a Californian). Yet we seem to persist in sharing with Europe and New York the absurd idea that the Pacific is rather beneath our notice. It may be a most important part of Australia's task of readjustment in the second half of the century to reorient herself culturally to the exciting rim of this great empty pond.

Under an outer wrapping of entertainment, the binding preoccupation of this book is the character and the style of Australians and the peculiar twists of Australian life: the things of the spirit and the wallet and the mind and the mantlepiece which tend to differentiate Australian men and women from other men and women in the 1970s.

Some of these things are so subtly ^{crude} that they cannot well be delineated conventionally; they shroud under literal description. So other techniques are introduced.

The book is a cry of despair for Australia, and an hysterical joke about it. It is solemn social comment and it is wild parody. It is fiction and it is history. The reader may sometimes find it hard for a moment to tell where he is being led. (Is this or that part satirical or serious, fact or fiction?) But behind all the parts is ~~a~~ a consistent attitude — the attitude of a patriot with a four-generation Australian background tearing his country to shreds, with love. Behind the crudest or funniest parts, even behind the horrifying parts, the temper of criticism is constructive.

It is written from an intensely personal viewpoint and some of the opinions are bound to infuriate some readers some of the time. Several of the aspects of Australia selected for examination have never before been discussed in a book — either because of what the author describes (seriously or cynically satirically?) as a conspiracy of silence, or because Australia has been too close to them to recognize them as peculiar to Australia.