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There's Even a Language Problem

Australian Scene Strangely Familiar To Canadians

By PETER DESBARATS

It is a large adolescent country with a small population. It worries about its identity. "This is the cornerstone of the Empire," says the office worker in one city. "We'll soon be a republic," predicts the writer in another. Everyone talks about development of the North but few people go there. The climate is too difficult. "Let the immigrants develop it," say the city-dwellers, living together in small corners of their wide-open country. They talk about new cultural centres, ballets and paintings. But all the teenagers are listening to rock'n'roll on transistor radios and dancing the Frug. The Catholics think that they are getting a raw deal on education. Suddenly it's fashionable to live in a whitewashed house in the slums. Everyone knocks the country but they believe, passionately, that it is unique and better than any other place in the world.

"I have a kind of senseless optimism about it," says a leading writer.

Does that sound familiar?

It is not Canada that I am writing about. It is that curious "other Canada" almost half-way around, and at the other end of the world. The Romans had a term for it — "Terra Incognita." And 2,000 years later, Australia remains an unknown country to most Canadians. Yet it would be hard to find two nations which more closely resemble each other.

Even in this jet age, Australia is a long way from Canada. You leave Montreal before lunch, board a Qantas aircraft in New York, dine on the way to San Francisco, smoke through to Honolulu, snooze to Fiji and eat breakfast before landing in Sydney the day after the day after you left. Crossing the international dateline, a day was lost. And you feel that, after so many hours of pleasantly anaesthetic travel, you should land far away from home. You should be in a foreign place.

Arrival Disconcerting

In this respect, to arrive in Australia is a disconcerting experience for a Canadian. You aren't certain what Sydney is supposed to look like, but somehow it isn't supposed to look like an overgrown Vancouver. You don't know what you expect to read about in the newspapers, but certainly not about the dangers of United States investment in local industry. Your hotel room might have been borrowed from the Park Plaza in Toronto. When you switch on the built-in television set, you find that the Beverly Hillbillies have followed you right across the Pacific.

There is even a language problem. Australians speak both English and a native dialect that puzzles pommies (British immigrants) and other foreigners but is perfectly comprehensible to wowers (bluestockings), bodgies (beatniks), widgies (female beatniks), surfies (amphibian bodgies), bludgers (no-goods) and all other fellow Australians (the term "Aussies" is heard in Australia about as frequently as "Canucks" in Canada).

Many Australian attitudes seem to be based on Canadian models. To any sort of criticism, Australians invariably react by saying, "But of course, we're only a young country, we don't have enough people." And if a Canadian reacts by saying, "But that's my line," his Australian listeners refuse to believe it because they know that Canada is a much older and more densely populated nation that has everything licked but a few Frenchmen. Australia is one of the few countries where a Canadian feels that he belongs to an ancient civilization.

A Scottish doctor in a northern mining town, who had lived in Ontario and Alberta at one time, said, "Canada, like the United States, belongs to the past." With a sweep of his arm, and the



CARTOONS BY McNALLY

"Cloe," a 19th century nude, overlooks the busy scene as crowd gathers around bar of Young and Jacksons, one of the oldest pubs in Melbourne.

Staff Reporter Peter Desbarats and Editorial Cartoonist Ed McNally have spent several weeks on assignment in the South Pacific area. This is the first article in a six-part series giving their observations on Australia.

beer glass at the end of it, he took in the blocks of neat bungalows, the mine heads, the tall smokestacks and the barren but copper-rich hills, and proclaimed, "The future is being shaped in Mount Isa."

To me it looked like a Canadian mining town, but not to him.

After a few weeks, the Canadian visitor begins to see the country through Australian eyes. At first, the myths get in the way. The line of vision is obscured by the "jolly swagman" striding through the outback between herds of kangaroo, catching an aboriginal spear in the abdomen and casually rolling a cigaret while awaiting the monthly visit of the Flying Doctor.

The swagman, of course, has followed the coureur-de-bois into history but a Canadian can be forgiven for recalling him because there is a grain of him carefully nurtured within every Australian male, enough to make him more conscious of being a male than is the average North American. Australian mateship — the "one-of-the-boys" bond between Australian men — is an over-rated and over-written subject but it does exist. It is not true that segregation of the sexes occurs at all house parties in Australia. In artistic and bohemian circles in Sydney there is usually a determined attempt to strip away barriers. But in middle-class homes, the women almost invariably are isolated in the living room while the male party takes place in the kitchen.

Australia is one of the last strongholds of two-fisted all-

male beer-drinking. A sporting club in Sydney, with 20,000 members, runs through 240 barrels or 35,000 pints of beer every week. It keeps a jealous eye on other large sporting clubs to make certain that its total isn't topped. For concentrated consumption, the "six o'clock swill" in Melbourne is in a class by itself.

Pubs in Melbourne, working under a 6 p.m. closing law, do up to 80 per cent of their business in the last 90 minutes of every drinking day. About 15 minutes before closing, customers start to stockpile beer on bar counters, shelves installed along walls for the purpose, in the crooks of their arms and even on the floor. At closing hour the whole city seems to gurgle as the "swill" reaches a final crescendo. Then there is a mass dash for railway stations and the long, lavatory-less train trip to the city's suburbs.

But even the "swill" seems destined to disappear in the near future, as a result of liquor law reform, and cocktail bars in Sydney are taking away business from the all-male taverns. In the Mount Isa Hotel in northern Queensland, miners still occasionally slug it out in a special "bullring" in the centre of the hotel, battling beneath a sign which states that "Ladies Will Not Be Served in the Bullring." But the average Australian today is not a miner or swagman or crocodile hunter. He is a suburbanite.

To him, Alice Springs and the other legendary places in central Australia are as remote as Hollywood. He has heard stories about "The Wet" in the northern port settlement of Darwin, when men are supposed to take to drink and sometimes to the noose, maddened by heat and depressed by constant rain, but to him Darwin is as unreal as Yellowknife is to the average Torontonion. In Sydney they told me, only half-joking, that moths like birds and frogs like puppies would be hanging from the roof of my hotel room in Darwin. In fact the air-conditioned hotel

there was one of the best in Australia; and the only mosquitoes I saw were in Sydney, a determined pair that managed to filter through the hotel ventilating system. I left a note for the chambermaid: "Spent the night with two mosquitoes. Can you spray something?" When I returned to the hotel that evening, there was a smell of insecticide in the room and a reply pencilled on the bottom of my note by the maid, who was at least 95 years of age: "Sorry you didn't have anything better than mosquitoes."

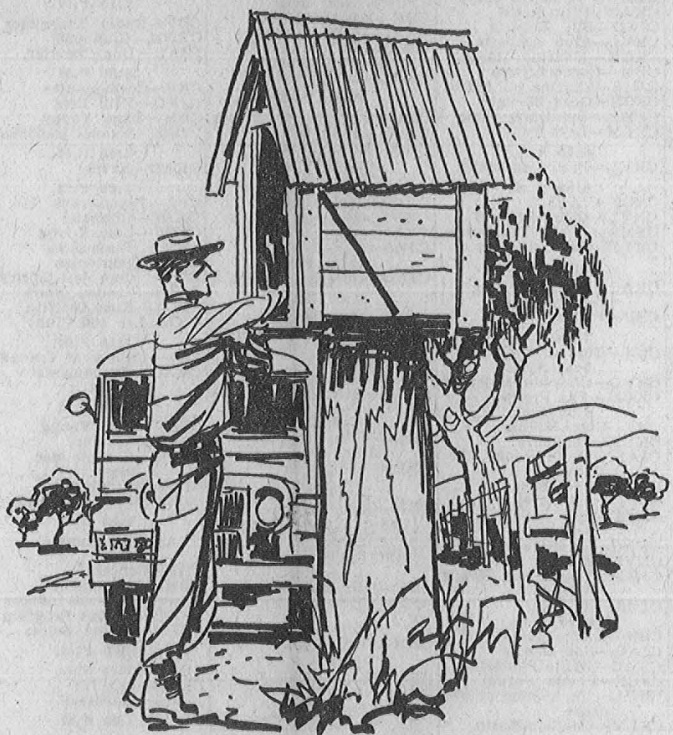
Her quip was typical of Sydney, a sprawling, egalitarian and extremely North American city of 2,500,000 people, slightly bigger and more pugnaciously aggressive than Melbourne, with more than 2,000,000 people.

Between Melbourne and Sydney there is a superficial Montreal-Toronto kind of rivalry. But more important than this is the fact that, together, the two cities contain about 40 per cent of Aust-

ralia's total population of 11,500,000. If residents of all cities of more than 20,000 population are classified as urban dwellers, less than one-fifth of Australia's population is rural. In Canada, by the same standard, about one-third of the total population of 18,500,000 is rural.

Few non-Australians realize the urban character of the country today and the suburban flavor of the large cities, where high-rise apartments are relatively few and the proportion of people who own their dwellings is higher than in Canada. As in Canada, this urban growth is changing the character of the nation with a rapidity that few people outside the country appreciate. The swagman has bought a bungalow in the suburbs and become, in the words of Australian writer Donald Horne, "... a man in an open-necked shirt solemnly enjoying an ice-cream ... his kiddy is beside him."

Tomorrow: Wowers and Winners.



Rural mailbox is vital link with the outside world.