

17

AUSTRALIA

It was September 1986. At last my childhood dream of going to Australia was about to come true. Or was it? The night before I was due to leave I attended my branch of the shopworkers' union USDAW in Balham, with Dot and another comrade, Geoff Thurley. On the way back a police van pulled out of a side street right in front of me and the back of the police van struck the front of the car. The police accident team was soon on the spot. The inspector said it was very obvious that the police driver was to blame. After all the statements had been made I asked if I could leave the country to go to Australia the following day. He signed a note saying that it was the police driver's fault and that we should put the claim to their insurance. He said he hoped I had a nice holiday. The next evening, Dot and Les took me to the airport, and at 19.30 hours I was up and away. The flight was everything I expected it to be. Plenty of food, and free drink. We had scheduled stops at Paris, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, Melbourne, and finally Sydney.

This trip of a lifetime came about because a few months earlier Paul Jennings had decided to join his family who had gone to Australia a few years before. Going in to work one day I had found a brown jiffy bag on my desk. It was from Paul; he had left it the evening before with the keys to his flat and a letter telling me that he had decided to go to Australia. He apologised for not having told me of his plans but he thought it best not to make it public. Quite right, too. He wrote from Australia to let me know that he

was OK and invited me to go out to see him. My first suggestion was to go for a couple of weeks, not really believing it would happen. Paul's reply said that I'd better make it five. I discussed it with Dot, who encouraged me to go and made it possible. So here I was on the Jumbo.

The only stop where we did not get off the plane was Paris. I watched the changing landscapes and the solid looking, mountain-shaped clouds. I talked to my fellow passengers, who were from all over the globe, sipping vodka and tonic at the rear of our compartment, casually glancing through the windows. I struck up a conversation with an Arab who discovered that I was a supporter of the Palestinian cause. Things were going well until he said that the only thing wrong with Hitler was that he did not kill enough Jews. For the sake of international relations and the safety of the plane I broke off our discussion and concentrated on an Indonesian who was hoping to set up a restaurant in Sydney. At another time the lady next to me remarked that there were too many easterners amongst the cabin crew. I simply pointed out that maybe it had something to do with the fact that she was flying with Air Malaysia. For some reason she thought I was being sarcastic. So that ended another conversation.

At each stop I made a point of seeing as much of the airport as possible and collecting as many freebies as I could. At Dubai I met a young couple heading for Kuala Lumpur for their honeymoon. They sat in their seats not daring to move until the call to re-board our plane. To remind them of their short stay at Dubai I gave them one of the freebies and they thanked me for my 'generosity'. I just said: 'No problem, enjoy your honeymoon.' The last I saw of them was as they went into the arrivals lounge in Kuala Lumpur. I walked around looking at the beautiful mosaics on the walls or looking out over the city from the viewing area at the top of the building. The stop in Melbourne was a little more exciting. I had difficulty getting back on the plane as I had left my passport in my bag under the seat. I was let on to the plane to get my passport then I had to get off again to show them that I had one.

Saturday 20 September 1986. At last, Sydney, over 30 hours after leaving Heathrow. Now some roles were reversed. I was being

met at the airport by Phil Sandford at whose place I was going to stay, along with his companion Carol and her daughter Lisa. On the way he let me see a view of the bridge and the Opera House. Then I was sure I had arrived. Phil lived in an old-style terrace house in Ford Street, off Parramatta Road, the first road built in Sydney Cove in 1820, running from the Cove to Rose Hill where the vegetable gardens were developed.

After a meal and plenty of talking I went to bed. The next morning I was collected by Comrade Derek Mortimer who took me down to Circle Quay, the spot picked out by Captain Philips, leader of the First Fleet. My imagination ran riot. In my mind I tried to get rid of the harbour, touring boats moored up to the quayside. Behind me would be the beach and the bush. And with a little imagination the roof of the Opera House became the sails of the First Fleet sailing into the harbour.

We went on a boat trip to see Botany Bay, Balmain (up to now only the names of Rugby League Clubs), and Manly. Another day Helen Voysey, who used to work on the *News Line* Editorial Board in London, took me to the rocks and showed me a block of old flats where an ongoing rent struggle was taking place. We met her mum and dad, Eve and Lou, who had worked in the Party's Sydney bookshop. We visited a park where her dad showed me a number of native Australian plants such as the Bonsai and Kangaroo Claw, and I saw my first ever Bird of Paradise. I spent a couple of nights at Helen's parents' lovely home. I was taken on a trip to the Blue Mountains where I was lucky enough to see the blue mist that comes up from the eucalyptus trees, with brightly coloured parrots flashing into view.

Carol and her mother took me to the replica of the once tiny Sydney Cove of the early 1880s. She gave me the evening of a lifetime: *Rigoletto* at the Sydney Opera House. During the main intermission, when I thought that it could not get any better, we went out on to the covered, fully glass-fronted promenade overlooking Sydney Harbour and had a bottle of Australian champers. I defy anyone who has experienced the music of Verdi and this especially beautiful panoramic view to say that it did not affect them emotionally. I shall never forget it.

A reception had been organised at Derek Mortimer's place for me to meet as many comrades as possible. I was presented with a wonderful book, *A Fortunate Life*, by Bill Facey, recording his life from a young child working his way round the bush to becoming an active member of the tramways' union in Fremantle. As a young man he was at Gallipoli in the 1914-1918 war. Wherever I went everyone that I met had to sign the book, which holds pride of place on my bookshelf. Bill Facey was voted Number One Australian of the Year towards the end of his life. A three-part film made for TV was shown in Britain shortly after I arrived back in London. If anyone can let me have a copy of the film I would be eternally grateful.

There was also a public meeting organised to listen to the tape made by Peter Fryer commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. Similar meetings were organised in Melbourne (Victoria), Perth and Fremantle (Western Australia).

About the middle of my stay in Sydney I went to spend the weekend in Melbourne with former WRP member Andy Blunden who had gone home to Melbourne after 1986. I had too short a time with the comrades there. We walked along the Yarra River where I heard my first Bell Bird. For all the world it sounds like a wine glass being struck by a finger nail.

There was a trip to see *The Bag Lady* in a fringe theatre where two of the comrades were active, and a trip to see the film *Malcolm*, followed by a ride on a Melbourne tram. Of course we had to have a barbie, in a park on a terrace by the side of the Yarra River. You bought the steaks in the shop and as soon as a barbie became available the one allocated to do the grilling got to work. I have never seen steaks as large. What an experience! A couple of pints, and I was well burped.

Before I left Melbourne, Andy told me that he had bumped into a member from London, one of the drivers who used to pick up North London's papers in the early hours of the morning. He was now living in Black Rock just to the north, and Andy had his telephone number. I rang Dave at Black Rock and gave him the fright of his life. As soon as he answered the phone I said: 'The North London Papers are still here at the Centre. Get here as soon

as you can and get them round the area.' There was deathly silence, then: 'Who is that?' 'It's Norman, who do you think it is?' We had a little chat, wished each other all the best, and I apologised for my opening remarks. He did sound a little shaken.

Returning to Sydney, I discovered that while I was away there had been a terrific hailstorm with hailstones so big that they put a number of people in hospital. A day later I heard that a similar storm was happening in Melbourne. Lucky me – I missed them both. I continued in Sydney by going to Taronga Park and Zoo from which you get a wonderful panoramic view of the Harbour and the surrounding area. I noticed the Kangaroo Paw and Bird of Paradise plants growing wild; I heard the cackling laugh of the kookaburra, and saw the pink wild galah (cockatoo), whose name is given to anyone regarded as a nuisance.

I made another trip to the Opera House, built on the place that had been called Bennelong Point, where a semi-Europeanised Aborigine built a funeral pyre and threw on his dead wife and child. She had become pregnant by another man while he was away being paraded around London. He claimed that he had murdered them so that the child would escape the life he had been forced to lead at the hands of the whites. I sat for an hour or more at a café table behind the Opera House imagining the First Fleet sailing through the two points into the harbour and heading for the cove. I visualised a landscape with no buildings and a huge lake with all the little coves and beaches scattered round the edge. Those with more experience of the harbours of the world than I say it is the most beautiful in the world.

Having tea one evening with Carol, Lisa and Phil I happened to mention that I would like to go to the Rugby League grand final at the Sydney Cricket Ground. That evening Lisa came in with two tickets for the game which she said was her contribution to my stay. It wasn't hard to get one of the younger members, Ray Ede, to go with me. The teams were Parramatta and Canterbury. We started off with a couple of beers in a local bar. Once in the ground a tray of beer had to be purchased. I settled down to watch the pre-match razzmatazz. Then something very strange happened. The crowd around me started to cheer. It dawned on me that the final had

started. The dancers and entertainers were still making their way from the touch line. There had been no build-up to the kick-off. At Wembley all eyes would have been focused on the tunnel, waiting for the teams to come out side by side, led by the team managers, to a thunderous roar. The kick off at the SCC was not in keeping with the importance of the match. I remembered seeing the opening scene of *Carmen* when the dancing and singing was lively and the music was telling us that at any moment the man himself was to make his entrance – when the door opened and in he strolled, just as though he was walking into his local pub. A complete anti-climax. That's how I felt at the start of this match. I had seen a number of the players at Wembley a few years before when Widnes beat Wigan and I was lucky enough to be in the press box, courtesy of Paul Jennings.

Still on the rugby league scene, Jim Mulgrew, the ex-leader of the Australian Trotskyists, took me for lunch at the headquarters of the Sydney St George team, followed by a visit to the social club. Every inch of the wall space of this very large room was covered with fruit machines. Heavy gambling took place there!

I met a Scottish comrade who was in the SLL in the UK, Bill Haggerty, who became the convenor of shop stewards at the naval shipyards on Cockatoo Island, just off mainland Australia. He had become quite a well-known leader in the labour movement in Oz. After quite a bit of talking and lubricating of the throat he saw me on to the right bus home to Phil's place.

I finished my stay in New South Wales with a trip up the Sydney Tower. You had full 360 degrees of all-round vision. You were able to see all the suburbs of Sydney as well as the different bays and beaches, including Bondi. When I went to Bondi it was not as special as I had expected it to be – but I still prefer it to Blackpool.

The day of departure was spent with Helen and Eve. We had lunch, and then made our way to the station. I next saw Helen in 2003 when she, her partner and daughter had a couple of days with Pauline and me at our home in Micklefield. Before leaving London the travel agent had rung asking if I would like to have a first-class ticket instead of economy, which was a reclining seat and a sandwich trolley. First class was a cabin with shower, toilet, wash bowl and

fold-up bed, observation car and three meals a day – steak with every meal if you wished. It was a special Australian tourist offer and it would cost me £20 extra – well worth it for my 3,000 mile journey to Perth, Western Australia.

I spent my time sitting at the table looking out of the window and making notes, or eating and sleeping, with an occasional visit to the observation car that doubled as a bar. We were soon into the Blue Mountains, leaving them behind as the evening and dusk fell. Steak for dinner, a glass of wine, and back to the cabin, where I settled down to read *A Fortunate Life*. I woke to the sound of bagpipes. I stuck my head out of the window and there in the light of the star-filled sky was someone dressed in all the trimmings playing *Will Ye No Come Back Again?* At breakfast (steak) the greeting was: ‘Did you hear the bagpipes?’ After a short chat I was back to the cabin, scared that I was going to miss a bush roo, emu or something.

First stop was Broken Hill, ‘Silver City’, on the most western side of New South Wales, the site of many militant working-class struggles. In the early 1900s the immigrants from the USA brought in many IWW members, who were able to get a hold in the main Australian industries.

The cry of ‘all aboard’ snapped me out of it. I was last! The conductor asked me what I had found so interesting out there – ‘it’s only a station’. I said: ‘The history of the place.’ ‘Ah, history,’ he said, in a very uninterested way.

The following morning we were on the Nullarbor Plain, a vast area of limestone, the bed of a prehistoric sea that had stretched for 676 kilometres. There is not a single tree on the plain. The train passed the point between Oldea and Watson where the longest straight stretch of rail track in the world starts, and terminates between Nurina and Loongana, 478 kilometres without even the tiniest of curves! Oldea is the only place on the Nullarbor Plain where there is a natural flow of water. Still on the Nullarbor, we stopped at Cook, named after a former Australian prime minister, Sir Joseph Cook. Formerly a watering and coaling station for steam locomotives, it is now a refuelling station for diesels. It has a single street about 200 yards back from the rail line and a shed that sells memorabilia and post cards. A really remote place, and hhhhhot!

Under this sun the earth of the bush glows like a red-hot cinder.

On this section of the trip the train slowed down to less than walking pace. We passed a gate with no fencing to either side and a box on one of the gateposts with an arrow pointing to the horizon. It had a number and a name on it. The Indian Pacific train had slowed down so that a member of the train crew could deliver the mail. Soon we were at the highest point of the journey at a place between Chifley and Coonana, about 400 metres above sea level. Then on to Kalgoorlie, scene of the 1893 Gold Rush that started when Patrick Hannan found his first nugget. I went on a quick flip round in a coach and saw the remaining gold mines all lit up like Christmas trees. Then we were driven down Hay Street, the government-controlled red-light area, where the girls of paradise waved at us from the well-lit doors of their B-and-Bs. No time to stop; train to catch.

The hundreds of miles through the Nullarbor was not boring. Although the scenery did not change at all, except when you saw three shrubs together, this landscape is a work of art. Mile after mile of nothing, but if you start thinking about how Aboriginal people lived here for thousands of years, then it becomes really interesting. The knowledge they must have had!

I finished my book before I sat on my specs so I guess that was a bonus. We arrived in Perth dead on 07.00 hours on Sunday morning, 12 October 1986. Paul Jennings and his sister took me to stay at their mum and dad's place. Paul took me to a barbie with his workmates while his sister took my specs to be mended. It was Sunday so I don't know how she managed it. On the way to the barbie we went through my first drive-in off shop for a case or two of 'tinnies'. I discovered that the host's grandparents had lived just a few doors away from my paternal grandparents near East End Park, East Leeds, and that his great grandfather Wainwright had played cricket for Yorkshire and test cricket with W G Grace. So out came the photographs. All this came out because the eldest son, Ronnie, of the Robinson family who lived next door to my grandparents, was also a professional cricketer in Yorkshire. (The youngest son is Detective Sergeant Robinson, referred to in the chapter on CND.)



At Wave Rock, Western Australia

What I saw of Western Australia was beautiful. The first settlement in Fremantle was founded in 1820, 38 years after Sydney Cove by fortune-seekers, not convicts. Friends and comrades took me to see many wondrous things. Landforms in Western Australia have been shaped by volcanoes, earthquakes, glaciations, inundations and erosion for millions of years. One example is Wave Rock, a granite cliff near Hyden, about 400 metres long and 30 to 40 metres high. It is curved with an overhang like a wave about to collapse. A truly amazing sight.

Paul and Tim took me to the Pinnacles in Nambung National Park, 200 kilometres north of Perth. The Pinnacles rise up to five metres high, and in the evening sunset made many long eerie shadows. You could have been standing on the moon surface. On the way, we stopped at a hotel near New Norcia for a beer and packed lunch, and at a monastery that housed the finest collection of paintings in Australia. On the way back we saw a sample of alternative Aussie hospitality: a gate, with no fence either side from the gate, a path to nowhere, and a noticeboard attached to one of



Alternative Australian hospitality

the gateposts: 'NO petrol, No water, NO phone . . .' – with an arrow pointing in the direction of the next telephone.

Bill Uren and his wife took me on a weekend car trip to the karri forest around Pemberton, three to four hours south west of Perth. The karri only grow in a restricted heavy rainfall area and are the tallest trees in the state. We also saw some double-spiked black boy bushes, as opposed to the normal single spike, which take ten years to grow an inch. We also went on a coach trip to a series of caves. The largest one was like an underground amphitheatre complete with stage. Singers were invited to try out the acoustics. We did get a volunteer and the acoustics were perfect. Going back to the coach I paused to photograph some beautiful wildflowers. The next I knew my name was being called; a 'search' party had been sent out looking for me. I made my apologies all round as I had delayed the coach by about fifteen minutes. It wasn't the time that worried the guide. She was worried that I might have fallen down a hole and discovered the Harding cave. Another memorable sight was where the Southern and Indian Oceans meet, marked by a distinct change of colour. Making our way back to Fremantle we stopped for a breather at a bay where I took a number of great sunset photographs.

Paul said no trip to Perth was complete without a cruise up the

Swan River to the wineries. Reluctantly, I had to agree. It was wine, wine, wine, all the way. There are more wineries on the banks of the Swan River than there are pubs in Otley (West Yorkshire). I'm sure that by the end of the day they were filling our glasses with Swan River water. If anyone had dared to ask for a beer they would have been thrown to the sharks. Yes, they have been reported quite regularly in the river miles up from its outlet into the Indian Ocean at Fremantle. At the Sandalford winery, we had a meal washed down with wine and then a tour to sample the different wines, fortified or otherwise. Here I noticed the difference in the taste of wine matured in oak casks, but after a while, no one in the party cared where the stuff was matured, if at all. The only difference with the return journey was that we were going in the other direction, not that anyone cared any more, dancing and singing and 'tasting' more wine. Back at the Barrack Street jetty in central Perth, the passengers were divided into three groups: those who could walk off, those who had to be helped off, and those who needed to be carried off. Paul and I really fell into a fourth group, where you are put into a cask and sent back upriver to be recycled. Fortunately his sister was waiting in her car to whisk us back to soberdom.

Water, or lack of it, is an important problem in Western Australia. On becoming premier of Western Australia just before the start of the twentieth century, John Forrest employed Irish engineer C Y O'Connor to oversee major public works, such as the railway to Adelaide, Fremantle Harbour and the water pipeline to Kalgoorlie and the surrounding goldfields and farms. Pumping stations pumped water from the dams in the hills surrounding Perth along pipes laid across 560 kilometres of hills and desert. The scheme took five years and opened in 1903. It is still in use today and supplies water through 8,000 kilometres of pipe to almost 100,000 people and 6 million sheep.

No.1 Pump Station at Mundaring Weir was impressive, especially when you visualised the distance the water had to be pumped. O'Connor was obviously a man of great foresight. His work is now revered and celebrated, but in those pioneering days, it was misunderstood and undervalued. Criticism of the pipeline by contemporaries in public and in the newspapers took its toll on a

proud, deep-thinking and private man. A year before the pipeline was completed, O'Connor rode his horse into the ocean at Fremantle beach and shot himself. He left a suicide note:

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The position has become impossible. Anxious important work to do and three commissions of inquiry to attend to. We may not have done as well as possible in the past but we will necessarily be too hampered to do well in the imminent future. I fear that my brain is suffering and I am in great fear of what effect all this worry will have upon me. I have lost control of my thoughts. The Coolgardie scheme is all right and I could finish it if I got a chance and protection from misrepresentation but there's no hope for that now and it's better that it should be given to some entirely new man to do who will be untrammelled by prior responsibility.

PS Put the wing walls to Helena Weir at once.

When garden sprinklers using water pumped from the many deep groundwater sources around Western Australia spray the pavements, roads and fences, the surface turns a bright orange, the predominant colour of the earth of the bush.

In some of the little towns I visited, such as York, about 25 miles east of Perth, you fully expected someone to ride down the main street and fasten his horse to the rail outside the saloon. One day I went into Perth on my own to look round. It was so hot, I decided to have a drink in a pub where about five Aboriginals were playing pool. Two were young women. At the end of the game one of them said: 'Hi fella, wanna game?' I put my camera down and picked up a cue. Before we started she said: 'Hi mate, better put your camera over the bar or some whitey might pinch it!'

Two or three years before I visited, V Redgrave did a tour of Australia and was taken to see some of the Aboriginal settlements and how they were treated by the government and authorities. John Troy asked why I thought she had not made a film about the plight of the Aboriginals as she had to support the Palestinian struggle. I told him there was money around in the Middle East countries, so

there was a market for the film and V Redgrave Publications would have no trouble selling it. I wondered who would have bought a film of the same scale about the Aboriginals' struggles?

During a stroll around Fremantle, I spotted an ex SLL/WRP member from Bristol in a poster demonstration of teachers in Market Street. He seemed anxious that no one should know of his past political activities although his aspirations were the same. He told me that what drove him out was the concentration on individual recruitment to the party as against supporting basic working-class struggles. Outside the Market entrance, a young couple were selling the paper of one of the small socialist groups. They explained their aims. At the time I still believed in building the elite 'revolutionary party leadership' and that only we could do it. This is what cut off any further discussion about ending the rule of capitalism. We shook hands and I went on my way.

My stay in Australia was coming to an end. I took Paul and his parents out for a meal as a small thank you for their wonderful hospitality. Anyone who could make it came to the traditional Chinese farewell meal in one of Perth's many fine restaurants. John Troy gave me £50 and said: 'We have had a whip-round to make sure that you have some money in your pocket for your journey and when you arrive back in London.'

Saturday November 15, after a light lunch with a number of comrades, I was taken to the airport. Hugs all round and away I went.

At Kuala Lumpur it was announced that we had developed an engine problem. Passengers were allocated to various hotels and I was fortunate to be sent to the Hilton. Full-blown meals at any time in the day, tables laden with exotic fruits. I was in the pool at seven in the morning in the blazing hot sun before breakfast. Then back to the airport. I didn't get any sleep even though I had a scrumptious room. I just wanted to enjoy the hotel and its grounds.

I was met at Heathrow by Dot and one of her sons and taken back to Clapham.