

NATIONAL IDENTITY

Cherie Lehman

The people in the line forming behind me waited impatiently, juggling overstuffed suitcases and pacifying excited toddlers. I stepped up to the desk in front of me as directed and a burly immigration officer bellowed in a thick Irish accent ‘Where are you from?’

‘South Africa’ I responded, without a second thought as I wondered if I’d left my reading glasses on the plane.

A sudden blur of blue waved up and down in front of my face as the officer held my travel documents and retorted suspiciously, ‘Why are you travelling on an Australian passport then?’ He gazed sternly at me with one raised eyebrow as if to say ‘ah ha!’ I began to recount stories told by friends and posted on Lonely Planet message boards of people denied entry at the hands of immigration officials for seemingly innocuous reasons. Nervously I explained that while I was born in South Africa, I had spent the majority of my 25 years growing up in Australia and had, in fact, been naturalised as an Australian. So, while I am from South Africa in the sense that I was born there, I am actually *from* Australia. Sir.

As I spoke, the officer’s thick, ruddy fingers methodically flicked through each of my passport pages. I anxiously willed him to grant me passage. He finally seemed satisfied, slid my passport across the white desk and ushered me through while motioning the next person.

A month prior, I had been offered a position with my firm’s Dublin-based office. I was excited at the prospect of working and living overseas. Although I had lived in many cities and suburbs in Western Australia, other than my early years growing up in Cape Town, this was my first real chance to experience life in another country.

Since I had very little money and nowhere to stay, I found myself in a centrally located hostel in Dublin, bunking with seven very well-travelled backpackers. On my first night, as I sat pondering how on earth I was going to find an unobtrusive area in this tiny room for my life’s possessions that I managed to stuff into one 30 kilogram suitcase, two bloated duffle bags and one over-sized ‘hand bag’, a bronzed blonde in the adjacent bunk introduced herself and asked where I was from. After a brief pause I responded, ‘Australia’, for only the second time ever – the first being my stumbled explanation at the immigration desk two hours beforehand.

Before departing Australia, I had always identified myself as being from South Africa. I was born in South Africa, my parents were born and grew up in South

Africa and I had spent my early years in Cape Town. I therefore considered myself a South African. However, upon leaving Australia, I started to question this long-held proposition. I had certainly lived significantly more years in Australia and I was an Australian national. Do I now identify myself as an Australian merely due to the passage of time? Do I hold out to the rest of the world that I now consider myself from Australia? What is it about me that would identify me as Australian? I frequently gave thought to these questions as I settled into life in Dublin.

As a foreigner in Ireland, I found that people I met defined me by my nationality. I would be introduced as ‘the Australian’ after which complete strangers would paint a picture in their mind of who I was, formulated from every stereotype they had ever seen and heard about Australians. On a typical night out, after the mandatory Irish accent-laden attempt at a hearty ‘g’day mate!’ the conversation would typically move quickly onto beer and I would soon find a Fosters thrust into my hands. Convincing my newly found friends that no Australian ever actually drinks Fosters was never an easy task.

As I continued to meet people socially and professionally, I was faced with confirming or denying images of Australian stereotypes developed through television series, pop idols, film, news media (what little news of Australia trickles through to the rest of the world) and stories recounted by people whose friends or family had travelled to Australia. I learned much about the ‘typical’ Australian from an Irish perspective, and how the Irish viewed Australia’s position in the world. Over the months, I discovered that in addition to being the second greatest consumers of alcohol, (the Irish being the first, of course), we were intrepid travellers, able sportspeople, spent all year round on sun-kissed beaches and were conscientious workers who managed to uphold a balanced, easy-going lifestyle. Australia itself was considered hot, enormous (especially compared to Ireland, the length of which can be traversed by car in less than a day), hot, barren, very, very far away and hot. It was seen as a country with a carefree, nonchalant attitude, with few international enemies and few national issues of global noteworthiness.

After living in Dublin for 18 months, I was unexpectedly transferred to my firm’s New York office. When I arrived at John F. Kennedy airport, I lugged my 35-kilogram suitcase, two bloated duffle bags, one oversized ‘hand bag’, and two Jameson-filled duty-free plastic bags through to the immigration counter when motioned.

‘Where are you from?’ the skinny red-headed (Irish?) immigration officer asked.

‘Australia’ I responded confidently..

Stamp, stamp. Stamp, stamp, stamp. ‘Enjoy your stay.’

In comparison to Dublin, I found New York to be an intense fusion of nationalities – a city where most people seem to be from somewhere, other than New York itself. I wondered if New Yorkers’ perceptions of Australians would be markedly different from the stereotypical images held by the Irish.

In general, most New Yorkers I met viewed Australians as boisterous and outgoing, with greater knowledge of the rest of the world than the rest of the world had of them. The great distances between Australia and anywhere else of note, the comparatively miniscule population base (the total population of Australia is virtually equivalent to that of the State of New York) and the impressions of reddened, barren landscapes seemed to portray an exotic, almost fantasy land to many of the people I met in New York and other cities across the United States. To many, the attributes of remoteness, small population base and undeveloped expanses of land implied that the country had little resources at its disposal, was somehow cut-off from the rest of the world and was therefore technologically ‘backward’. The vast majority of Americans I spoke with expressed a sincere appreciation for what they considered to be a remarkable quality of life in Australia. After working many months of long hours in Manhattan, walking other people’s dogs on the city’s endless paved streets and squinting through the polluted summer haze out of my apartment window to watch the city pass me by, I certainly came agree.

In my first few months in the United States I learned much about the American view of Australians. But it was certain events of global significance that took place while I lived in New York that brought greater clarity to my own question of national identity.

The events of 11 September 2001 reverberated globally. At the time, I lived on the 28th floor of an apartment complex three blocks from the World Trade Center. While I thankfully experienced no physical harm, I experienced the events of that day up close, and the difficulty of the months following permeated through the routine of my daily life in New York. It was a heartbreaking time to be living in the city.

For many months after the terrorist attacks in the United States, I sensed I was a stranger in a city, in a country, that I did not belong. When tragedy strikes, it is natural to want to return to the sanctuary of family and the safety of home. And I felt myself longing to be in Australia. I followed the local ceremonies held by the expatriate Australian community in New York. I scanned the Australian embassy website to keep in touch with news, and to mourn for people I did not know, but who I felt I knew in some way. I became a member of a small community within New York, defined by the nation to which we were all connected. I was saddened by the suffering of people intimately touched by the events of that day and of the days afterward, but I harboured intense sorrow for Australians directly affected and was

particularly protective of Australians who were living in New York, away from home, exploring the world just as I myself was.

During the New York summer of 2002, I faced the prospect of losing my job with Arthur Andersen as a result of the firm's involvement in the historic downfall of Enron Corporation. These events lead to a shake-up of the financial markets as confidence in the system plummeted. I lived four blocks from Wall Street at the time. New York is not a city anyone can afford to live without a regular income, so I quickly scrambled to look for a job with the thousands of other Arthur Andersen employees during a time of depressed economic conditions. As an expatriate, I felt isolated and again part of a system to which I was an outsider. I became acutely aware of the temporariness of my time in New York. Although I was sure I would find employment elsewhere (and I did), I realised that the city, the people, the lifestyle, the culture and the national psyche were foreign to me, and while I enjoyed the opportunity to experience a different perspective and way life, America would never be my home country, for I could not relate to her personally.

The political process leading up to the U.S.-led war against Iraq and the act of war itself divided people and nations around the world. While there was significant support, there was also strong opposition to the policies of the United States. I followed the news as it unfolded with keen interest. But as the Australian government raised its unfettered hand in support of the US initiative and provided her own troops to aid the cause, it became a personal issue that I monitored rigorously. I was fearful of the increased media attention Australia gained as a result of the statement of alliance, which was already unusually high since the tragic terrorist attacks in Bali approximately five months beforehand. I felt protective and guarded about Australia's involvement and, I have to admit, I paid more attention to the war and was more vocal about my opinions than perhaps I would have otherwise been, had Australia not been directly involved.

I have now spent almost four years living and working overseas. In doing so, I inadvertently put myself in a position of having to stake a country of origin – to determine the country I truly considered my home nation.

I gained some insight into the images of Australians and of Australia based on the stereotypical impressions projected onto me by the Irish and American folk I met since I left Australia. While stereotypes are oversimplified, generalist statements that are most often more myth than reality, I believe they often echo a vein of truth. It is that thread of truth woven through the stereotypes, reflecting the virtues and values of the people and of the country that I found myself associating with and proudly defending. By experiencing recent world events, I further uncovered an emotional connection to Australia.

Without my knowing, a sense of national identity was shaped through the many years I spent in Australia, through the friends I made and through the experiences I shared with those friends and with family. At some point along the way, I tapped into the national consciousness – I now see that I view the world through the eyes of an Australian and feel a spiritual and heartfelt connectedness to the country. It is ironic that I had to leave Australia to not just call myself an Australian, but to truly identify myself as Australian.



Cherie Lehman has been living and working in New York since January 2001. Prior to this, she lived in Dublin, Ireland for 18 months. Cherie travels whenever she has the opportunity and enjoys writing about her travels along the way.

Copyright © 2003 Cherie Lehman, All Rights Reserved