

# 'WHAT WOULD WE DO WITHOUT THE AUSTRALIANS? THEY COME, STAY AND GET THE JOB DONE!'

**Cindy MacCartney**

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Similar to many young Australians, I too longed for the day to travel. As a child I'd read the entire Enid Blyton series and watched *The Sound of Music*. My father had emigrated from Northern Ireland by boat as a boy and I could count on one hand my second-generation Australian friends. Therefore, determinedly after completing University, I gathered all the money I'd been conscientiously saving for the past 5 years while working weekends as a 'check-out chick' at the local department store. I waved goodbye and skipped onto the plane destined for a whole new world of adventure. It was after the plane trip to London the term 'bored to tears' was understood at a whole new level. Additionally it was instantly comprehended why Australians tended to leave and not return to their home country for a long time- it's SO far away.

I was set to stay for a while. The perfect candidate for the classic Antipodean experience with a teaching degree in one hand and a UK passport in the other. But the idea of actually teaching in London had been put on the back burner while I had the time of my life doing some rights of passage travelling. Sailing off the coast of Turkey, attending the Full Moon Party in Thailand, sampling the local goulash in Eastern Europe, the Hogmanay festival in Edinburgh for New Year. Work just failed to cross my mind. Fresh from university, the thought of working in an inner city London school was too much to bear. That is until I quickly realised my hard earned cash really wasn't worth all that much in a foreign country and subsequently... I ran out of money.

The day I forced myself out the door to complete my first day of supply teaching in East London is a distinct memory and a huge personal achievement! It was as if there were two people, both acting as me, standing in the dingy corridor. One holding onto the front door of our not so sophisticated but very charming ex-housing commission flat, the other with a hard foot at the base of my back kicking me out the door. The more aggressive personality shone through luckily enough, as this was also the one that I would need teaching in London for the next four years.

London schools are very similar in both their look and nature. A building older than Federation, a playing area 3 x 10m minus the grass, an abundance of loud and cheeky children and the few overworked and stressed out teachers. Working as a supply teacher meant having a maximum of 12 minutes to get a grip on the new school, new classroom and new timetable before the bell rang to signal the start of each day. Marking the register for attendance each morning was always a challenge. In particular with my interpretation of various Asian, Indian, Caribbean or West African names. 'It's my-boob, miss', as opposed to my more conservative interpretation of mah-bub.

Finding the class at the start of the day was no fun. School security meant there were often only a few entrances or exits, which door was which was never really clear. If the wrong one was chosen there was sure to be a backlash. Most probable a child in the background ready to go and tell 'Sir' rather than help out. In the playground it was a guess as to which children belonged to Year Five, or were they Year Three? What do nine year olds look like these days anyway? With little recent experience hanging out with kids I always managed to offend a couple of children, and that would mean the start of a reasonably average day. One where I would run from the school at 3.35pm doing high fives with the knowledge that I had earned my 100 pounds for the day and I was out of there and off to enjoy what London had to offer.

As a young, independent woman London had a lot to offer. I had a large network of Australian friends and we absolutely revelled in our new lifestyle. We were the 'Big Lin girls', named after the building in which we lived, and being self-sufficient in London felt so cool! Our regular rituals included choreographing dance sequences to be premiered at various London parties and a Saturday morning instalment of reruns of *Beverly Hills 90210*. Our associates were the 'Osprey boys' and the Karaoke queens from Glenfield Rd., not to mention Club Balham. The weekends away in Cornwall or Rome, music festivals, 'orphan' Christmas dinners, clubbing nights and Sunday sessions at the local became regular lifestyle. We were hooked onto London town. We came, stayed and experienced life to the full.

However even the good life has a time limit. As a UK passport holder I witnessed the huge turnover of Australians with a 2-year working holiday visa. I had the luxury to stay without such a stringent time frame. Although at times this could create more confusion. Nevertheless I watched various people come and go with the newfound knowledge that the world wasn't as big as once thought. Hot Dog Sunday could exist in Melbourne too! Eventually I settled with more of an English crowd, which if at all possible, symbolised more of a 'real life'. Working to achieve rather than working to exist gained some importance. There were regular social

engagements with a small network of close friends, i.e. intellectual evenings at the pub. The Australians were no longer separate, just as not everything was always such a novelty. It felt like quasi-real life. As friends we could all sit and shamelessly become addicted to Big Brother 3 together, regardless of nationality.

It was during this transition period of my social life that I landed a week's long supply teaching job at a school in Hackney with a Year 6 class. As usual it was a countdown throughout the week and a feeling of triumph when I left on Friday having survived the class. The following week I received a very complimentary phone call and the question 'We'd love to have you back, does tomorrow fit in with you?'. Subsequently the truth was discovered that the regular class teacher had run away at recess! I felt sorry for the kids (to a certain degree) and needed the work but also had an inbuilt determination that I could survive teaching that class. I'd done one week, I could do another, and another if need be. I agreed to step in and consequently fell into what proved to be the biggest challenge of my short career.

Thankfully the school in general had a true sense of the reality of the current situation in education. That is, relying heavily on supply teachers from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada to take over full time positions of responsibility in order to allow the school to continue to operate. They proved to be most helpful in order to make me feel comfortable and supported. Always insisting that if asked, they knew I would come back and stay. They could always rely on the Australians.

Immediately the small community of highly respected Australian teachers that already existed in the school were sent my way. Not only for a little laugh and encouragement but most importantly, to fill me in on the location and direction of 'the school pub'. Especially for that cathartic Friday afternoon verbal vomit session which always covered topics in the order of naughty children, outrageous parents, the education system, the government and finally life minus school.

My stories often included the escapades of a Down's syndrome Nigerian boy in my class named Ibukun. Funnily enough his antics often revolved around our national export "Neighbours". Ibukun adored and identified with the character Tad so much that he signed every piece of work, and various other parts of the room, with the name Tad. When I called his name in class his answer was always 'No, me Tad, me Tad'. His real brother was referred to as Paul, his dad, Harold, and his mum, Madge, just like the soap character's on screen family. As it happens through various Melbourne connections I was able to give him a signed card from the real actor of Tad's character, Jonathon Dutton, addressed specifically to Ibukun. Watching the other children's faces light up in excitement for Ibukun as I presented him with his special gift on the last day of the school year was just priceless.

As is common when dealing with children anywhere, each day resulted in a new instalment of character updates. Flatmates would call out as they heard the front door slam, the bottles of Stella clinking as an indication of the day's events, 'What did Aaron do today?'. I of course was always in dire need to speak with adults and gladly responded. 'Oh, today was a good day. All he did was light a roll of toilet paper on fire and throw it in the toilet. No harm to anyone!'. They laughed at the girls' reactions after I returned from a holiday in Spain. 'What's with your face, Miss? It has spots all over it', 'Ah, they would be freckles, with my skin type this is what can happen after being in the sun.' And their fascination with my soft, straight, light brown hair. Similarly my fascination with their ever-changing hairstyles. Words and symbols shaved into the boys' hair, a continuous array of differing hair extensions and braiding for the girls'. When Tyranny came to school hiding her head in her jumper hood I was puzzled as to what was the cause. After some encouragement and her insistence on not moving the hood I finally realised that her braids had been removed and she was embarrassed. Instead of long flowing braids she now had little tufts of her real hair left. I never thought I'd hear myself saying sympathetically the words 'Oh, have you had your hair taken off? That's okay, you still look absolutely beautiful'.

Through the years of working at that particular school I found myself finding the job easier, feeling better prepared and becoming a far more confident teacher. This fact often portrayed itself in my personal life. Such as when I felt the need to put on 'teacher voice' sporadically while socialising 'DO listen when I'm talking thank you!'. When meeting friends from Australia during my summer breaks of travel, the comment was often made that I'd changed. Thankfully this was in a good way, such as being a lot more confident, proactive, determined and outgoing. These were qualities I'd learned through standing up in front of a class of 32 children. However they were also general qualities I'd learned through my experiences surviving in London as well as travel I had undertaken throughout various countries during the school holidays.

By the time I left the UK the school that I had been a part had improved dramatically in the National Standardised Testing. As a result it was reviewed in high regard as a school whose students' had achieved despite the evidence of low socio-economic families and the high incidence of children with special needs. It was a very important time for the school and one which propelled a sense of positivity amongst the school community and the borough of Hackney itself. During the leaving ceremony on the last day of the school year, the comment was made 'What would we do without the Australians? They come, stay and get the job done'.

From my experience, this is not an uncommon saying. It is general knowledge that the majority of Australians in London regardless of the field ‘Work hard, play hard’ and they are always good value. For many of us the UK was initially a place located close to Europe’s mainland for opportunities to travel. It also became our home, where we strived to achieve in our profession, experience the best things in life and gain personal qualities that would be used in the mapping out of the future. And generally the future tended to be a life settled back in Australia. Whether that be in 5 months or 5 years, we’d be back with amazing experiences and stories to tell in addition to an excellent lifestyle.

As an Australian in London I was no different to the thousands of others who had also made it their home. By the time I left the UK I was an expert at London’s underground tube system, could perfectly arrange my day to fit in a full evening at the pub with 11pm closing, would run and sit anywhere outdoors at the first glimpse of sun, embarrassingly enough knew the characters and the storylines on the television soap Eastenders, been part of the World Cup 2002 phenomenon also running to work early to see kick off and proudly being able to name each member of the English football team, and to the utmost annoyance of my partner Nige had picked up a tendency to drop the ‘h’ sound at the start of words such as in the sentence ‘I’ll –ave a go’, or to end my sentences with ‘innit’. The butchered English language, or perhaps the beginning of the International Supermodel accent, being a result of my time spent working with children, and adults, in ‘-ackney’.

After four years in London I decided that I would finally allow myself to leave, I’d done my bit. To stay or to go, either decision finally felt like a good possibility. But when the opportunity to move to New York through Nige arose, we both gladly accepted the new challenge. I packed up, bid goodbye to my second home and once again boarded a plane for another new adventure. As soon as I arrived I realised New York was a whole different ball game. Another big, English speaking, world-class city... but very different in so many ways.

I became a novelty. Suddenly I was oh-so interesting, as I was Australian. Australian actors were hot on the scene in Hollywood, so I was associated with them. It also meant that I was had obviously grown up with Jenny, Nicole, Matt or any random Australian that had ever been known to an American. My accent was ‘loved’, although at times not understood. Early on a veteran Australian in New York let Nige in on the priceless secret. That is, professionally by addressing business emails with the standard Australian greeting of ‘Mate...’ would result in quicker replies received and a large feeling of respect. After all we were ‘Os-sies’.

Obvious New York differences included it being similarly cost effective to eat out or take out or home cook, socializing required answering a series of set questions

that could start with 'I have an MBA from Columbia Business School and work for a leading investment bank. What do you do?', it was trendy to have Starbucks take away coffee on hand at all times e.g. the subway, shopping or at an aerobics class and according to one of the many 'Dating Rules' if a guy hadn't handed over the goods, i.e. a 3-carat diamond ring after two years of dating, he was to be dumped and a new trust fund recipient was to be found. Finally the biggest difference for me was the lack of a working Visa. I was an alien.

Through a friend the opportunity arose to take over a cash-in-hand job with a regular Upper East Side New York family. It was a nannying position for two girls'-a two and four year old, and I was one of three full time employees. The other personal employees being a housekeeper, and a baby nurse who lived there permanently to specifically care for the newborn baby. The children were enrolled in various enrichment classes such as Broadway babies, cooking, singing, gym, ballet, sculpture, French, ice-skating, rock'n'roll babies, painting, kids sports... I spent a lot of time attending these classes with the children quietly taking in and reviewing the new social system I was witnessing.

In terms of the 'nanny hierarchy' I was considered as being close to the top. After all I was white, Australian (which meant a fairly good concept of the English language), well travelled, well educated and, of course, a teacher. This resulted in two very differing approaches. One was that of often being mistaken as the mother. At the playground when pushing one of the girls' on the swing I was told by an I've-just-been-to-exercise-outfit mother 'Your daughter is so cute!'. As soon as it was explained that she was not in fact my daughter, exercise mother portrayed a look of horror and ran away. The other approach was a direct result of the knowledge that I was 'only' the nanny. Therefore conversations went on, despite the fact I was sitting in between latest-autumn-range-outfit mother and rushing-off-to-museum-meeting-outfit mother. The nanny didn't exist or could not possibly be acknowledged. Despite this again I was determined to just do the job at hand, laugh about it and file it along with all the other experiences.

Obviously working in New York was somewhat different to my experience of working in London. It became time to find a proper job to further my career. Professionally the battle began. Dealing with the New York City Department of Education became a frustrating and subsequently amusing experience. It took 6 months for me to convince the department that I was in fact a qualified teacher. When finally enough evidence was provided they informed me I could teach, but just not reading. I could have a job, but state and city certification was required. I could fill one of the 11,000 vacancies, but there was no suitable vacancy just yet. The waiting game began.

Since being in New York I have witnessed the after effects of September 11th. I met a young mother enjoying a night out with friends who confided that her husband had died in the World Trade Center attacks, their child being born post the event. The threat of another terrorist attack early in 2003 caused frenzy amongst the wealthy middle-aged women of the Upper East Side. They spent their time and money sealing with plastic and duct tape their windows and vents. In addition to the creation of a safe room in their apartments stocked with food, water and medical supplies in the event of a biological attack. Intently I followed news of the war in Iraq only to go back to visit the UK and confirm that I was watching and reading a whole lot of, what could be termed as, propaganda. New York really felt like a different city and was one that took some time in which to assimilate.

However the opportunity and experience of living in New York outweighs any drawbacks. And I have slowly learnt ways to survive in this new city. Such as the drill when ordering classic American food 'Burger, medium, Swiss, salad, dressing on the side!', the true meaning of extreme hot and cold temperatures, the necessary argument not to be charged for an item twice by the local dry cleaners, and the slow, deep breathing required when riding in a NY cab in an effort to avoid travel sickness. Each day I become more comfortable with my surroundings by finding New York treats- a favourite cocktail bar, a perfect pizza joint, the stylish design stores in Soho and the beauty of Central Park. I know that once again I can make this my home away from home.

Often I have been met with the incredulous comment 'Why is it that so many Australians are living and working overseas?'. I can only answer with the knowledge that I, similar to many other Australians, was brought up to experience and experiment with all that life has to offer. As a child I was thirsty to understand and be a part of the other cultures I'd read and learned about. I wanted to stay and envelop myself in the country rather than do a quick tour of highlights. Australia was far away and I was going to make the most of the imminent opportunity. As a result many Australians have permeated differing societies and cultures throughout the world. With pride I recently attended a Creative Arts event in New York that showcased talented Australian artists, fashion designers, writers and actors, demonstrating success at the highest level. It was then that I was really struck with the awareness that Australians have definitely made a mark on various industries throughout the world.

Just as millions of Australians have a tale to tell of how they travelled and settled in their new home country, the thousands of Australian expatriates around the world have many anecdotes to share about an experience overseas and survival away from home. And in my experience for the most part they have been fantastic times.

When I do eventually move back home, I'll do so with the knowledge that I chose to leave Australia for all that it had offered me and I will return for the same reasons. In the meantime I did go, stay and get the job at hand done.



**Cindy MacCartney** is aged 28. She grew up in suburban Melbourne, left Australia to begin travel in 1996 and subsequently spent four years working as a primary school teacher in inner city London. In between working she took the opportunity to travel extensively during the school holidays. Since late 2002 she has been based in New York City.

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