

# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO MY SCHOOL BUS?

**Edmund James**

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One dawn in 1988 I woke up on a Qantas flight from Fiji, and heard the pilot say we could see Mt. Kosciusko on the right hand side. I looked out the window to see a low mountain range in the distance, illuminated by the pale light of dawn. It was my first glimpse of Australia for 28 years.

There is a fault-line in the family album. For the first few pages there are three small boys smiling, laughing, and playing in the sunshine, over and over again: myself and my brothers in the garden in Hawthorn, myself and my brothers on the beach at Mount Eliza. All of a sudden turn the page and the three faces have stopped smiling. Three small boys looking stunned, in Kensington Gardens, in dark coats under a grey sky. Three small boys looking despondent, in Piccadilly. Always wearing raincoats. All the pictures look black and white. Britain can't really have been black and white in the early 1960's, it just looks that way.

We walked down the gangplank of the MV Fairsea in Southampton on 1st July 1960. The Fairsea took Italian immigrants from Naples to Melbourne, and on the return journey took anyone who wanted or needed to go to Naples or Southampton.

Melbourne was all we knew, mainly my grandparents' house and garden in Hawthorn. We'd just started building a house of our own in Mt. Eliza - that was a big adventure.

The first thing we knew about anything else being in store was the injections. One Sunday afternoon Dad took us to his surgery near Port Melbourne. When we saw the needles we knew we weren't going to like it and ran off and hid in the darkroom, but in the end we were all rounded up and jabbed.

It turned out that Dad had to go to London for 2 years to work, so we were all going. That's what these injections were all about. That was the first indelible effect of being brought to England - fear of needles. Even when I was an adult I could pass out at the sight of one.

We finished building the house in Mt Eliza, but instead of moving there we went one May night and boarded the MV Fairsea. We stood on deck waving goodbye to everyone. Dad lifted me up and sat me on the rail with my legs dangling out over the water - I stopped waving and tried to pretend I wasn't worried about dropping like a stone into the sea. It was exhilarating and terrifying.

It took 5 or 6 weeks to go to England by ship. Needless to say, there was one more injection on the ship. We were lined up outside a windowless cabin with a kind of slab in the middle, it must have been the ship's sick bay. The syringe was bigger and meaner-looking than my Dad's. One by one we filed in to lie face down on the slab and be jabbed in the bum.

The whole family, Dad, Mum, me, Mike and Roger, had a cabin with six bunks - we occupied five and one was empty. For the first week we lay groaning with seasickness most of the time, after that it was a holiday. Every day the three of us played in the pool or on deck. When we crossed the equator the adults had a ceremony from which children were banned. We snooped as best we could from a vantage point on an upper deck – as far as we could make out it involved the men dressing up as women, the women taking all their clothes off and everyone jumping in the pool, so we couldn't understand why children couldn't join in.

We stopped in Colombo and I cried when I got the news that Essendon had lost. We stopped again at Aden, Port Said and Suez. None of this prepared us for England.

Melbourne was warm and familiar. England was cold and weird. My uncle had a model railway running round his garden in Murrumbeena - our garden in London wouldn't fit one of his sidings and the rails would have sunk into the mud.

At least it was different. The first winter in Britain we went to the Lake District for Christmas. Outside it was frozen. I got a train set for Christmas and played with it on the floor of the hotel room. On the way back to London, we visited some family friends in Yorkshire. We set off again towards London and it began to snow. After a while we could drive no further. We and all the other cars were stuck until a snowplough came and dug us all out.

The following winter was the big freeze of 1962-63: the Thames froze over, the snow stayed for weeks and weeks and weeks. Even my Mum was excited – she said it had snowed in Melbourne once, but not like this

The ice and snow was an occasional exciting novelty. The cold and rain were ever-present and depressing, but it wasn't just the cold and rain. Everything was grimmer and harder - the world we felt comfortable in had disappeared. You couldn't just go out and play in the sandpit when you felt like it. You had to jump in the car and be driven for an hour and a half to get to the country, then if it wasn't raining or freezing you could play in the sandpit if you could find one.

In Melbourne I used to wait every day for the school bus. Usually it was a green bus. Some days it was a blue bus. Very occasionally it was a brown bus. I felt proud to go to school by myself on the bus. As I trudged to school in London I thought of the school bus and wondered when I'd be waiting for it again. There were

red buses in London, double-deckers just like in the books, but they didn't go to school.

But it was OK - we were going to go back after two years. Or at least that was what we thought until two years went by. We still knew we were going back to Australia - my parents had promised - it just didn't seem to be happening yet.

In the meantime the fault line was opening wider and wider. Dad didn't seem to be coming home very much - it turned out he'd run off with an English woman - that wasn't part of the plan.

Times became very hard. In Australia Mum didn't work. In Britain she had to work. Mum worked in a doctor's surgery and we lived in the flat above the surgery. We felt stranded half a world away from home.

At school we started something called speech training - we had to go and stand in front of a woman at a desk and recite the same poem, week after week, all about two trees standing sentinel. It wasn't until much later that I realised somebody had probably decided to eliminate our Australian accents.

We clung to the idea that one day this would end, we would wake up at home in Melbourne. In 1966 dad went to Melbourne - just him - and sold the house in Mt Eliza. My grandmother came back from Melbourne to live with us in England. So obviously the plan had changed a bit. But still we knew we were going back one day.

In our tiny backyard in London my brothers and I behaved as if we were in our vast back garden in Melbourne. We ran around and made a lot of noise – well in Melbourne the next people were half a block away. Here in London there were a lot of complaints from the neighbours. Eventually Mum could stand it no longer and bought a tiny house in the country, with nothing but fields or woods round about, where we had enough open space to pretend we were in Australia and could make as much noise as we liked.

Two years became ten years. I had a ruler with Australian eucalyptus woods along the centre that my dad brought back one day – that was my most treasured possession in school. I still clung to my Australian identity. Everyone else seemed to want to re-inforce it too. When the Beatles came along and everyone grew their hair one of the teachers started referring to me as the Australian bush.

We knew we were going back – it was only a matter of time. In the meantime, we had a steady stream of visitors from Australia, family and friends of the family. They all found Britain a fascinating place to visit, a sort of historical theme park. They imagined that we spent our time having tea with the Queen and watching Wimbledon.

Not only did we not go back to Australia, we didn't go anywhere. In 1970 we couldn't have afforded to go to France let alone Australia. I didn't have a passport

until I was seventeen. Then I had to go on a school trip to Greece, and I got a brand new Australian passport from Australia House. That at least was reassuring - the Australian passport was the tangible symbol of the happiness and security I'd left behind. On the way out through Dover, the English immigration official checked my passport and told me I might not be allowed back in - that was quite encouraging.

I have four Australian passports, all issued overseas. The first is my schoolboy passport issued in 1970. The second is my hippy passport, from when I was a student: it smells of strawberries because it got left in a bag of strawberries for a day and a half at the bottom of my rucksack. The third was issued in Paris, when I worked there in 1980. In that period Australia itself remained perversely out of reach. In the vacations I had to work to earn money to be at university. Travel to Australia was still expensive - wide-bodied jets had only just been invented. I could work in the holidays for long enough to get the train to Turkey, but I couldn't work for long enough to fly to Australia.

Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote a poem in the early days of Communism called 'My Soviet Passport', in which he celebrated the bright new hopes for the future that he felt for his new country. I always felt my Australian passport was full of the hope that was in my childhood visions. Mum and Dad had always promised that we were only here for a while, so deep down I was waiting to go back so our lives could re-start. This was just an interlude, we had to go through the motions of going to school and university, but we'd go back and re-start our real lives sooner or later.

British officialdom seemed out to make me pay a higher and higher price for being an Australian. When first I travelled overseas, I came back through British immigration in a queue called 'Commonwealth' - that was great, because the Commonwealth queue from a place like France was always the shortest queue. One day they changed it - now I had to come through a channel called 'Aliens', which was a much longer queue. Apparently Commonwealth didn't exist any more for immigration purposes, and making feeble jokes about 'Hi I'm an alien' did not compensate for the extra wait. Then they changed it again to EU and non-EU, which made the queues even worse.

Two years became ten years became fifteen years. It wasn't my parents any more that stopped me going back - it was my own life. When I left university I got married. My new wife was studying full time in London and I was the one that needed to work to support us. She kept saying what a long flight it was to Australia - 'it takes more than a day', she kept saying. I didn't like to point out that I'd come here on a ship that took five weeks.

Two years became twenty years. We went to live in France – I had to move there for work. Being an Australian in France in the late 1970's still had a lot of rarity value. My colleagues in Paris had not been sure what to expect when told an Australian was coming to work with them.

The thing I liked about Paris was that they didn't make an issue over me being Australian. English people would say where do you come from. When I said Australia, people would either launch into their standard Barry McKenzie/corks on hats routine and fall about helpless with mirth, or demand to know why I didn't have an Australian accent - as if I'd been deliberately inserted into their midst as a sleeper agent who at some pre-determined point would break cover and start behaving as a stereotypical British notion of an Australian.

The French did not have this stereotype - if they'd encountered an Australian at all, and many at that time had not, it was watching the rugby team on TV, or an Australian cyclist in the Tour de France. They just about knew that kangaroos came from Australia, and some of them had the romantic idea of Australia as a vast and distant natural wilderness. They had no idea what to expect and took me as I was.

In Paris we used to go to a restaurant called the Port St. Bernard - it was, for Paris, very unusual - the food was American, yet French people filled the place up every night. An American pianist called Jimmy McKissic played there all evening. Jimmy wasn't happy just to tinkle away playing Chopin all night – he liked to play gospel and get everyone in the restaurant to sing along. Normally a French person wouldn't be caught dead singing along to 'Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore' – especially with dinner to concentrate on - but when Jimmy's enthusiasm was so compelling that they did. When Jimmy found out I was Australian he would play waltzing Matilda whenever I came into the restaurant – anywhere else it would have been embarrassing but in the Port St. Bernard it was always touching.

I spent a year in France at business school - there were two Australians - myself who'd been away for twenty years, and Garth who lived in Switzerland. One day the business school was contacted by a Frenchman, the owner of a restaurant, who was interested in immigrating to Australia. They put him in touch with Garth and me, and he invited us to dinner. He wanted to know whether there was any market opportunity to open a French restaurant in Australia. Garth and I explained, patiently, that actually there were already a few restaurants in Australia and some of them were even French.

Australians were always very accepting of the fact that I was an Australian who'd been abducted from home as a child by misguided parents and left in the lurch on the wrong side of the world. They didn't query why I didn't have an accent. If I went to an Australian event nobody batted an eyelid at the fact that I turned up for

Australia Day or Anzac Day or Melbourne Cup Day with the wrong accent and a rusty or non-existent knowledge of contemporary Australian television.

The only thing that most Australians didn't see was why I was so keen to go back – either they were on holiday, or they were living here temporarily. They'd always been able to go back whenever they liked: their home and their childhood hadn't been uprooted and obliterated. For different reasons most British people didn't see why I'd want to go back either – Australia then was still a distant colonial stereotype.

Twenty years became twenty-five, I went to work for Fosters in London. They were involved in a big hostile corporate takeover in the UK, and my new boss confided in me that 'we wouldn't have hired you if you'd been a Pom'. Finally it looked as if I might go home. I spent a very wet English summer watching the 1985 Ashes series, the last time in living memory that Australia got beaten on English soil.

Along the way I'd divorced and now had a new Scottish girl-friend who didn't have English hang-ups about Australia being a long way away, and she was mad keen to go out to Australia too. But once again events took a turn - our first child came along, and suddenly it was out of the question to go to Australia because she wanted to have the baby in her own country.

Many Britons and especially Europeans have the idea of Australia as a land of magic at the other end of the horizon. There was a French film entirely set in France where the guy in the film knows nothing about Australia except that it's a long way away and everything is wonderful. There was a French advertising group which had a subsidiary agency called *Australie*, they thought that was the best name they could think of for a business selling dreams.

For me it was much more homely but equally out of reach. It wasn't a distant and unattainable dream, it was childhood memories that were all too real but gone forever. I don't know what other children have etched into their subconscious that they cling to, as they grow older and realise that actually that was as good as it gets and it's all downhill from here, but for me it was those childhood memories of comfort and security in a Melbourne suburb.

I worked with the Japanese in London for a while. The Japanese were fascinated by Australia. One night in the Ginza I went out and ate the dreaded fugu fish with a group of Japanese colleagues. After dinner we went to a karaoke bar where I met a TV journalist from NHK who lived in Sydney - his full-time job was making documentaries about Australian fish to beam back to Japan, where they were watched by an audience of 30 million people.

One day one of the Japanese said to me 'You are not Austrarian - how long you rive in Engrand? 20 years? 30 years?'. He was, I knew, an Anglophile with a

secret dream of retiring in Scotland to play golf, drink whisky and grow wasabi. I said 'when you've lived in Britain for 30 years, do you expect people to tell you you're not Japanese'. He laughed.

Two years became twenty-eight years. It was Australian bicentennial year. Australians were still caricatured in England as Barry McKenzie, but Australia had also started to mean a lot more. British people might still crack jokes about corks on hats, but they drank Australian wine in vast quantities, went to see Australian films, and in some cases worked for Australian bosses who'd either taken over their company or become internationally mobile with some multinational. And, finally, we could afford to travel to Australia, my daughter was old enough to go on a long-haul flight, and my wife hadn't yet acquired her fear of flying. Not only that, half the British people we knew were suddenly going on package holidays to my country, and I suddenly couldn't see why it should be so easy for them but not for me.

So finally in November 1988 there I was flying into Melbourne from Fiji. In Melbourne we recovered from jet lag and visited my childhood haunts. We visited my uncle and aunt and my cousins. We searched for my grandparents' house at 51 Power Street, and had a look at the garden. 34 Koornalla Crescent in Mt Eliza seemed to have moved - somebody had mucked about with the numbering. We went to have a look at the West Hawthorn Primary School and chatted to the janitor about how I'd been given the strap in that playground for laughing during God Save the Queen.

It was this safe predictable suburban Australia that was my home, the one I was ripped from when I was nearly seven. It wasn't Europe, where every inch of the continent bears the imprint of hundreds of years of recorded history. It wasn't the Australia of European mythology and tourist brochures, the Australia of towering skies and Ayers Rock, of surf and bronzed bodies. It was a suburb in a corner of a fairly flat empty slab of rock on the edge of the Pacific. It was an Australia where had I stayed I probably would have grown-up to be a dentist or a doctor in Melbourne like my parents, my grandfather, my uncle and my cousins. There was nothing particularly special about it – unless you'd been torn away from it when you were a child, and waited years for your childhood to resume, before it dawned that it never would. At least I'd proved it was really there and I hadn't imagined it.



**Edmund James** was born in Australia of Irish descent. He was transported to the United Kingdom as a child but has maintained links with Australia through his

work and family. He has worked in several international businesses as well as being a writer of satire. His leisure interests are golf, seal-watching, and acting as unpaid taxi driver and homework consultant to his children.

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