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# AN AUSSIE IN CANADA

Jenny Gates

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**‘You can take the girl out of Australia, but you can’t take Australia out of the girl!’**

If you had told me 10 years ago that I would end up in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada – about as far away from Australia as you can get without having to change languages – I would have thought you were crazy. Indeed, that’s what most of my friends and family thought when I told them I was quitting work, selling my home, packing up my things, and heading north.

I had stumbled across Canada many years before I moved here. So when I decided that this was where I should be, it really wasn’t much of a surprise – to me, anyway. As for the rest of the people I knew? Well, let’s put it this way. When I told my friend, David, he laughed. ‘You? Move to Canada? You can’t even decide where to sit in a movie theatre. How can you decide to move to Canada?’

For the record, I certainly didn’t move because there was anything wrong with Australia, and contrary to the ease with which I write it all here, it was not an easy decision to make. I wasn’t sure I could leave behind my family, my friends, my work, my home, and the best country in the world. Still, I felt it was the right decision, a move that would open doors, broaden my horizons, expand my competencies, give me a fresh perspective, and allow me to take my Aussie-ness on the road.

In 1992, I was working two jobs in Sydney – as a researcher at the Australian Museum and as the pianist/vocalist at Rigger’s Bar in the Novotel Hotel. Life was full, life was great, but I was restless. I knew I should be doing something else, be somewhere else, try something else, something different. Starting my own business in editing and writing was high on the agenda, but where to go and how to take that first step? Lots of places in Australia tweaked my interest, but I couldn’t make a decision. I kept thinking, ‘If I’m going to move, I may as well really move.’ It seemed easier to go clear across the world than to go just around the corner.

Why not Canada? I had been there before, briefly, a long time ago, and it seemed nice. I could visit my friends there and use the time to look around and try to get a feel for the place.

I travelled during the winter because I figured that if I couldn’t survive the winter, I should forget the whole thing. Yes, it was cold – -39EC in Winnipeg for ten days straight was the big test – but from day one I was smitten, especially to Winnipeg [*lesson #1: people in Winnipeg will always think you’re crazy if you move*

*there from Australia*]. By the time I left for home, it had become clear that I had something to offer this place, something unique, something downright Australian.

Back in Sydney, I applied for residency and was told it would take 8 to 12 months – plenty of time to make sure I was on the right track. Needless to say I was a bit surprised when my papers arrived seven weeks later. Convinced they had made a mistake, I went to the Canadian Consulate to check things out. The lady behind the counter was perplexed.

‘Do you have a job lined up over there?’

‘No.’

A moment of silence.

‘Um, do you have a sponsor in Canada?’

‘No.’

A longer moment of silence, and then she looked up with a sly grin.

‘Do you have a million dollars?’

‘No,’ although I was temporarily hopeful.

‘Well,’ she said with a big smile. ‘I’m not sure why, but everything is definitely in order. The next time you set foot on Canadian soil, you will be a permanent resident of that country.’

From then until I left, things were quite a blur. Resigning my jobs, saying goodbye, getting everything in order, and shipping (or selling) all my belongings was very exacting. But I didn’t waiver under the pressure and on October 31, 1994, I took the biggest step so far in my entire life.

At first, there were some challenges, not the least of which was arriving at the start of winter. I soon learned that a full Winnipeg winter is unlike anything I’d experienced before [*lesson #2: there is a big difference between a winter holiday and actually living in a winter city*], but having been down this road before, I was ready for it [*lesson #3: the secret to survival is 50% the right attitude and 50% the right clothes*]. After surviving a touch of frostbite [*lesson #4: find a way to take photos with your gloves on in -37°C*], spending some time in a blizzard [*lesson #5: blizzards make great film footage for the folks downunder, but are not recommended for an afternoon’s touring*], and almost succumbing to the tongue on the metal pole thing [*lesson #6: yes, they really do that here*], I had my first ‘language’ moment [*lesson #7: some Canadians still think that Australians don’t speak English*].

I was having some trouble making myself understood while giving directions to a bus driver. A lady on the bus presumably overheard the conversation, moved to the seat in front of me, and began to ‘chat’.

‘Where – are – you – from?’ she asked in a very slow and articulated voice.

‘Australia.’

‘What – are – you – doing?’

‘I’m going downtown.’

‘Ooohhh.’ She thought for a moment. ‘It’s – very – cold – here.’

‘Yes, it is.’

Silence and then she said, in that very slow and articulated voice:

‘Well – I – think – it’s – wonderful – that – you – are – over – here – learning – another – language!’

There were the usual ‘I used to have a teacher from Australia. Her name was Jill Smith. Do you know her?’, but thankfully, no one has yet asked me if kangaroos really run wild in the streets.

Others were more focused on the accent than on what I was actually saying. Those people are easy to discern, however. They seem to be listening but have decidedly blank faces and slightly glazed eyes. ‘Ooh, I just love that accent!’

So, I decided to try and blend in with the locals by learning lots of new words, but after the initial phase of trying to sound like most everyone else here, I opted to stand my ground. Instead of cantaloupes, Rice Krispies, peppers, sweaters, toques and gas, I ask for rockmelon, Rice Bubbles, capsicum, jumpers, beanies [*lesson #8: never ask for a beanie in the winter, which in Canada is a little cap with a propeller on top*] and petrol – much to the humour and confusion of anyone within earshot.

I quickly settled into life here, and after staying with a friend for a few weeks, staked out my own territory. I found a place with indoor heating [*lesson #9: every house has indoor heating*], took a job at J.J.H. McLean’s pianos and keyboards [*lesson #10: if you can play ‘em, you can sell ‘em*], and bought my first real Christmas tree [*lesson #11: be sure to water your Christmas tree after you secure it in its stand*]. Unfortunately, by the time Christmas actually arrived, there were only about seven needles left on the tree, but it didn’t matter – I was doing a Canadian thing.

When spring came around, I met Canadian rain. Not any different to Australian rain, except that in Winnipeg, you don’t really see any of it between November and March [*lesson #12: it snows in winter – for a very long time*]. So, by the time rain fell one cool April evening, I had forgotten all about it, about how it smelled, how it felt, how it sounded. As I danced around outside in a deluge, I was instantly homesick – for corrugated iron roofs.

Spring also reminded me of one of the reasons I was here – to start my own business in editing and writing. And as much as I enjoyed having grand pianos at my beck and call, I knew that the piano store would not help me move quickly enough toward my goal. I needed to find out who the key players were in the community. I needed to make connections with them. I wanted to make my mark in this city. And

when I was offered a job as editor and writer at a consulting company – with a truckload of connections – I jumped at the opportunity.

Still reeling from so much change in such a short time, I made a promise to myself as I stood with one hand on the door to my new employment: ‘Two years. This is only for two years. And then I launch my own business.’

The deal was done, and two years later, to the day, ‘get it write.’ was officially launched.

From there, things moved rather quickly, and in directions I could never have predicted. In no particular order, I tried my hand at acting, landed a few small roles, and was director/producer of two video documentaries. I joined Toastmasters and later the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers, and made public speaking a cornerstone of my company. I was a guest host for one year at CJOB radio and did some commercials for the piano company. I am on the Board of Take Pride Winnipeg!, a group focused on keeping the city of Winnipeg as beautiful as possible. I was also on the Board of Freeze Frame, an international festival of film for children and youth, and am now Executive Director of that organisation. I am a freelance journalist for the Winnipeg Free Press, and published an article in the Sydney Morning Herald, expounding on Winnipeg as the ideal winter destination [*lesson #13: flying to Australia for some one-on-one arm twisting of the travel editor certainly helped*]. I have written poetry, stories, commentaries poorly disguised as letters home, and worked on a yearlong series on Y2K for a local paper. I became editor of the Manitoba Naturalists Society Bulletin, and now edit books for local authors, one of which was on the bestseller list for more than 6 months. And I write my own books, as well as kid’s songs about Australia.

It’s not that I don’t think there were opportunities for me in Sydney, or anywhere else in Australia for that matter, but it seems I have a more open mind and more courage to pursue different things. Perhaps because, as one friend suggested, there was no safety net here when I first moved, no one to fall back on, to run home to. It was make or break time, and I just knew my true blue spirit would keep me afloat. She’ll be right, mate!

Indeed, much of what defines me here incorporates my Aussie-ness. Soon after arriving, I met a guy from Melbourne who told me about the Down Under Club of Winnipeg (DUCW) for ex-pat and other Aussies and Kiwis living here or just staying here for a while. My first thought was: ‘Oh gee, who wants to hang out with a bunch of folks from down under?!’ After all, I wanted to be part of the Canada thing. But I soon changed my tune and realised that hanging out with a bunch of mates literally from my neck of the woods was good for the soul and for the spirit. Before

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long, I had firm friends, lots of fun, and was editor of the DUCW News – later to become *The Southern Yarn*.

The DUCW is a great forum for all things downunder. It began more than 55 years ago when Aussies and Kiwis came to the Canadian prairies to train in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (also known as the Empire Air Training Scheme). The club now has about 170 members, including a smattering of Canucks who have some affinity with or a true connection to Australia and/or New Zealand. The DUCW is firmly entrenched in the community and involved in different events (i.e., Dragon Boat Race, 24-Hour Relay for Easter Seals, Folklorama), promoting Australia and New Zealand to anyone who would listen. One of our members (Peter) was a temporary radio correspondent during the Sydney Olympics, and both his brother (Richard) and my brother (Stephen) are regular correspondents (in Australia) on issues ranging from farming and the Bali disaster to bushfires and life in general in the Great Southern Land.

For my part, I formed a duo (“Up From Down Under”) with a local didgeridoo player – who knew?! We travel to various festivals, schools and other events performing Australian songs and introducing audiences to life downunder. I am also the media and entertainment coordinator for the Australia/New Zealand Pavilion at the Folklorama Festival held every year in the summer. The pavilion introduces Winnipeggers and others to the delights and music from downunder, and is consistently one of the most popular at the festival. And no wonder. In recent years, we have featured an Australian Aboriginal performing group (Tal-Kin-Jeri – 2000), a Maori youth group (Kahurangi Rangatahi – 2001), and our own bush band (Up From Down Under – 1997).

I believe the move to Canada, to Winnipeg, is the best move I ever made. I am successful in business, indescribably happy in my personal life, part of the fabric of the community here, have taken chances I’d never have even thought about taking, and progressed to heights I never thought possible. I am fully a part of Canada, but I have never forgotten who I am and where I am from. And although I often felt the need to become a Canadian citizen, I was never able to even consider it while it meant losing my Australian citizenship.

When dual citizenship became a reality, many Aussies in the DUCW rejoiced and immediately applied for Canadian citizenship, me included. While I waited to become a Canadian citizen, I published an article in the *Winnipeg Free Press* (June 2002) to explain – from my perspective – the virtues of dual citizenship and what it meant for me.

‘As a permanent resident, I can work, pay taxes (and bills), and come and go as I please. And while I can revel in all the good fortune and friendship that Canada

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offers me, I can't vote and I can't call myself a Canadian – two things that would make me proud and official.'

I went on to explain that while I knew relinquishing my Australian citizenship didn't mean I was no longer Australian, it just didn't feel right.

'Australia is who and what I am, and I need to simultaneously acknowledge that, as well as the country which now encourages me to go even further. I want to be an ambassador for Australia and Canada and to give something back, to enrich both countries, as well as my family and friends, through my work, achievements, experience, energy, vision and passion. All I ask in return is for both countries to be proud of me and to respect my absolute inability to choose between them.'

'And how can I choose?' I wrote. 'I get emotional during their national anthems, cheer for all their athletes, honour their special days, expound incessantly on their values, thrive on their successes, question their failures, and am deeply grateful for the life they continue to offer me. Indeed, the two places often blend into one, connecting my past with my future and firmly positioning me in the present. Unofficially, I am about as dual as you can get. I cannot deny or ignore the strong connection I feel to both countries and I certainly cannot trade one for the other. Every time I go back to Australia, I take something of Canada with me, and vice versa. What better reason to be a citizen of both countries.'

I became a Canadian citizen on May 8, 2003, much to the enthusiasm of the local media who covered the ceremony and helped spread the word to other Aussies scattered throughout Manitoba.

My only regret since leaving Australia? That I didn't make the effort to see more of it while I was there. There are far too many places I have never seen, too much I don't know. So to rectify this, I have embarked on a bit of a mission:

- to get to those places, meet the people who live there, explore my country, and see it from a 'outside' perspective
- to teach people in both countries about each other, show them places that will inspire them, fill them with awe, and help them understand and share in the love I feel for my homeland and my new land
- to bring my nieces and nephews to my other home, to enhance their knowledge, put it all at their fingertips, and show them why experiencing more than their own backyard is both exhilarating and imperative.

It's funny, but in some ways, the move to Canada has made me more of an Aussie than ever before. Oh, not in an actual sense, of course, but here I can be an

ambassador, a promoter of all things Australian, an example of the Australian way of life – and nothing could make me more proud.

Before I sign off, a special thanks to my Mum. She has been sending me ‘Aussie chocolate survival kits’ (with everything from Darrell Lea’s Rocklea Road to Allen’s Fruit Pastilles) a few times a year ever since I moved here. As for anything else, I make a point of picking up a few things whenever I am downunder – R.M. Williams boots, Akubra hats, Gowing’s clothing, Bond’s undies, Arnott’s biscuits, Cottee’s cordial, Milo, Vegemite, Weet-Bix, and a variety of authentic souvenirs, artifacts and knick-knacks. Since I can’t pack the outback, the reef, the beaches or the bush into my suitcase, I guess these pieces of home will just have to do.

As they say, ‘You can take the girl out of Australia, but you can’t take Australia out of the girl!’

Good on ya, mate!



**Jenny Gates** doesn't like to sit still. A successful book editor (‘get it write.’) and professional speaker (‘having said that’), Jenny is currently writing her first book and is the Interim Executive Director of a children's film festival (‘Freeze Frame’). She literally stumbled across the Down Under Club of Winnipeg before she even moved to Canada, and is now the media/communications officer of the club and editor of the monthly newsletter (*The Southern Yarn*). Jenny embraces every opportunity to show off her Aussie-ness, and in her spare time, enjoys the symphony, theatre, acting, and walking her dog, Sydney.

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