

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Michelle Witton

‘I’m not going *there* – I could get killed!’ protested my English friend. ‘Every night on television there are shows about sharks, crocodiles, snakes, spiders – you name it – anything that creeps, crawls and bites – *all* from Australia’.

‘And crossing the road in peak hour traffic on Bond Street isn’t dangerous?’ I replied. ‘Look - we’ve got population of something like 17 million people - *and* growing - so the wildlife obviously isn’t killing Australians off.’

However, she did have a point.

Countless are the times I’ve overheard English say, ‘Australia – I’d love to go there but...’ their voices falter, ‘...it looks *ever so* dangerous.’ Though market research may not have yet revealed this - the single greatest boost to Australian tourism won’t come from our masterminding successful games events or publishing glossy pictures of our sun-blessed shores, but by our banning the production of wildlife documentaries. Every night the British turn on their televisions to join Val and Ben Cropp battling a murderous Great White shark, Steve Irwin wrestling a crocodile, Bush Tucker Man devouring a witchetty grub – a situation exacerbated by the growing number of cable channels, National Geographic and Discovery among them, for which wildlife documentaries are staple programming.

Bombarded by such programming, Brits well might be forgiven for thinking the average Australian is involved in hand-to-hand combat with the great-outdoors every day. True, the residents of Ramsay Street and Summer Bay, also well known to British viewers, rarely encounter anything more venomous than a spiteful next door neighbour or vengeful ex-girlfriend, but it’s an accepted convention of the ‘soap’ genre that characters don’t have to mess with anything big enough and nasty enough to mess with their hair gel - which rather rules out shark attack in Summer Bay.

So far as wildlife goes, the British have nothing more frightening to contend with than sheep and parking ticket inspectors. That ‘the great outdoors’ can harbour danger is a concept foreign to the British psyche. It is with a corresponding naivety and want of vigilance that British encounter their countryside, setting off into the woods without appropriate footwear, sufficient food and water - let alone a Band Aid. Theirs is a worldview that assumes that there will always be a quaint pub, corner shop or petrol station over the next hill to supply their needs. This worldview is not entirely unfounded. Mount Snowdon, at 3560 foot, is Wales’s highest peak, reached by a five and a half hour at times near-vertical climb, which is not for the feint-hearted. The

summit is remote, stark and buffeted by high winds. Yet, even here, the promise of a cup of tea is only feet away - at the summit's well-appointed café.

Britain is a comparatively small island that has been inhabited and cultivated since 4000 - 2500 BC. In Britain is the little sense, perhaps with the exception of the Scottish highlands, of 'wilderness'. The land has been wholly discovered and tamed. The woodlands that remain – the remnants of once vast tracts of forest - have been isolated, contained and are regularly overrun by foxhunters and their baying packs of beagles, out for some relaxing weekend bloodsport. This want of wilderness is in stark contrast to Australia's largely still virgin bush land and the expansive outback, where to wander too far can easily mean privation and death. National parks close to major Australian cities, such as The Royal National Park on the outskirts of Sydney, still contain vast tracts of unexplored bush land.

The lack of appreciation of the dangers of the bush, heat, desert and vast distances and lack of preparation in the face of these dangers contributed to the failure of the expeditions of many early Australian explorers. The 1860 expedition led by Irishman, Robert O'Hara Burke, and Englishman, William John Wills, set out from Melbourne, aiming to be the first to cross the continent from the south to the Gulf of Carpentaria. The 16-strong expedition was well prepared - in comparison with many contemporary expeditions. The men set out with enough food for 2 years along with 28 horses and wagons, 24 camels, 80 pairs of shoes and, rather perplexingly - 57 buckets.

Though well equipped, hindsight has attributed the expedition's tragic failure to the men's rash decision-making and lack of bush sense. Burke, a former police inspector in the gold-mining areas, had no experience of exploration or of living off the land and had little knowledge of bush craft.

Travelling in the middle of summer, contrary to advice, and leaving supplies and equipment along the way to satisfy Burke's desire to travel faster, the party of explorers became separated when Burke decided to go ahead with a party of eight men to set up a depot at Cooper's Creek. The party further separated when Burke, Wills, King and Gray decided to make a dash for the Gulf, leaving Brahe in charge of the Cooper's Creek depot. The men reached the Gulf, but their long return journey was hampered by extreme heat, sandstorms, dysentery, lack of food and Gray's death. When they reached Cooper's Creek in February 1861 - they found the camp deserted. All that remained was a message cut into a tree: DIG – 3 FEET N.W.

Digging beneath the tree Burke, Wills and King discovered a letter with the news that after waiting for their return for four months, the Cooper's Creek party had departed southwards the previous day. Burke, Wills and King were too exhausted to pursue them. Nor did they discover the supplies buried beneath the tree. At Cooper's Creek the three grew weak, ekking survival on seeds and on fish given them by friendly

aborigines. Burke and Wills died waiting to be rescued. When eventually found by a search party King was living with a tribe of aborigines. The expedition was a tragedy. If the explorers had been better Bushmen they could have lived off on the fish from the creek. If the men had stayed closer to the aborigines they could have survived.

Contemporary Australians, through our upbringing, education and the media absorb a mantra of survival-related 'Don'ts' such as 'don't travel into the outback without water', 'don't leave your vehicle if stranded', 'don't get sunburnt', 'don't swim out of your depth' and, of course, the ultimate 'Don't' – 'don't forget the Aeroguard'. Though these precautions may seem common sense to many Australians, they are not contemplated by tourists from countries in which the dangers of the outdoors and the elements are far less significant. This is reflected in the number of tourists and new Australians who are lost in the bush or who drown in swimming-related accidents.

In Australia, vigilance is learnt at a young age. The days of the outdoor toilet or 'dunny' may be now past. However, born in 1967, one of the songs I first learnt was 'There's red back spider on the toilet seat' - hardly a song to inspire children's confidence to venture out to the toilet alone and after dark. To me, 'There's a red back spider...' conjured visions of huge blood-red spiders waiting in dunny to pounce on and devour me.

Our parents and teachers never told us how many children had actually been killed by Red Back Spiders whilst going to the toilet. Regardless, every nighttime visit to the dunny, shuffling out there in my pyjamas, grappling with a torch that was bigger than I was, was a Hitchcock-ian journey of terror. The torchlight threw huge shadows on the fibro walls as I cowered on the toilet. I daren't touching anything – the seat, the floor, and the walls - else the spiders would get me. I figured speed was the essence to tricking the spiders – if I could get in there, do it and dash out before they noticed me. Unfortunately, my fear often rendered my efforts in the toilet of little effect, so holding on till morning, though painful, was often the safer option.

Most Australians make it beyond childhood without being killed by a Red Back on the toilet and, as adults, we adopt a devil-may-care bravura when discussing close encounters with creatures of a venomous kind. I recently visited a husband and wife, soon to visit Australia, accompanied by the husband's brother on his first trip to the Great Southern Land. The husband rummaged through his bookcase for books for his brother to read to prepare for his holiday. He handed him two books.

'Oh, can I have look?' I asked and reached for the books. Turning them over I read – 'Australia's Most Dangerous Animals' with a cover picture of hiking boots and a nightmarishly hairy spider and 'Australian Venomous Snakes' a lurid red-covered book with a cover-photo of Tiger Snake – rearing and fangs bared.

'NO! You can't give him these to read!' I protested. 'Look,' I said to the brother, quickly leafing through pages of badly focussed photos of huge Funnel Web spiders, 'I lived in Australia for 25 years and only saw *one* of these!'

'Which one?' he asked suspiciously.

'Red Belly Black Snakes – we get them near my parents' house.' His eyes widened. 'They are venomous - but they're more frightened of us than we are of them – honest'. He snatched the books from me as if his life depended on them.

In the fifth century, the Irish were greatly assisted by the miraculous works of St. Patrick who, legend would have it, preached a sermon from a hilltop that drove serpents into the sea and so rid the Emerald Isle of snakes. Legend does not record however where all the snakes slithered off to but Australians, no strangers to immigration, might well have cause to harbour suspicions. Odd how we have so many snakes – 140 species to be exact - isn't it?

It does little to assuage tourists' fears to tell them that only around 10% of Australia's snakes are really poisonous. With names like The Southern Death Adder, Fierce Snake and Tiger Snake little reassurance is provided by guidebooks which advise that these snakes are 'not particularly aggressive' and only bite in self-defence. Few folk are going to be keen to hang around to find out whether or not a Southern Death Adder has had a bad day and is feeling a little defensive. However, if you do want your friends to visit Australia, do not tell them that our country is home to the most venomous snake in the world - the Taipan - a small amount of the venom of which will kill a quarter of a million mice. We, and many mice, have cause to be thankful that the Taipan is very reclusive, preferring to hide or escape rather than attack.

Australians hardly help foster perceptions of ours being a safe country when the international media carries stories of peoples' efforts to befriend even the fiercest of creatures. In 2001, London newspapers incredulously carried photographs of holidaymakers to Cape Jervis, South Australia, leaning out of their pleasure boats to pat the gapping-jawed muzzles of Great White Sharks. A Cape Jervis local interviewed mused, 'They don't *look* like the aggressive man-eaters they're supposed to be.'

Sorry though Australians may be to concede this, sharks are able to swim faster than Ian Thorpe and, with 3,000 razor-sharp teeth, tear their prey limb-from -limb before swallowing them. Given the veritable 'Great White Love-In' at Cape Jervis and the scores of boats which followed a white pointer shark in Sydney Harbour in 2002, Australians are becoming increasingly indifferent to sharks' 'anti-social' eating habits much to the bemusement of potential visitors. Spokespersons for the marine welfare group, Shark Trust, argue sharks are the vilified victims of Spielberg's *Jaws* in which sharks were unfairly cast as the aquatic 'Bad Guy'. While asserting swimmers are 50

times more likely to die from drowning than shark attack and that most shark attacks are not fatal, one wonders how trusting members of Shark Trust themselves would be if left in the company of a shark who hadn't eaten for a few days?

It's a worthy aspect of the Australian national character that we give folk 'the benefit of the doubt', in which tradition we've elevated Ned Kelly and Mark 'Chopper' Reid from the status of 'major cons' to 'folk heroes'. But we've got to draw the line somewhere - and we've got to draw it at sharks. This isn't a case where we can say, 'they're good blokes *really* - they've just suffered a lot of bad press' or hope sharks will turn over a new leaf given understanding and an Anger Management Course. It is not character assassination but a tenet of natural science to declare that sharks are the natural born serial killers of the sea.

The British also retain a healthy scepticism about crocodiles. Many learnt the song 'Never smile at a crocodile' as children and, unlike 'Crocodile Hunter', Steve Irwin, heed this advice. This seems imminently sensible in the light of a news report in 2000 that a Darwin swimming coach planned to put a three metre crocodile from a local reptile park in the public pool in order to 'inspire' his seven to twelve year old swimmers. 'I thought it would be a good start to the swimming season' he said.

The coach planned to drug the reptile and wire its jaws shut. Unfortunately, the crocodile he wanted to use was appearing in a television show. So the reptile park lent two 80cm crocodiles instead, with rubber bands securing their jaws - a lot of faith to place in a rubber band. However, the swimming coach and reptile park manager changed their minds about putting the crocodiles in the pool with the children at the last minute and instead allowed the youngsters have their photograph taken with the crocodiles. The reptile park manager said, 'It was not for safety reasons that we didn't put them in, it was just because there were so many people around who might have become worried or scared that something might happen.'

However, if British friends do take the plunge and set off out down to 'Oz' - one must of course, in the spirit of friendship, warn them about the Drop Bears.

'Drop Bears' they reply, 'I've not heard of them before. What the *hell* are Drop Bears?'

'Well, you know koalas' I explain, 'Drop Bears are like a mutant koala, only *much* bigger - 8 foot in fact - and they bite. You'd want to watch out for them when you're walking in the bush because they just drop on you out of nowhere. They hide - high up in the trees, wait for tourists to walk by then...BAM - just drop on them. We've lost whole busloads of Japanese tourists like that. Then, of course, you also want to look out for the Lasso snakes - they'll whip around you and tie you to the nearest tree, AND the Killer Mosquitoes - boy, one sting and you're a goner!'

It may seem a little cruel to take advantage of our British cousins' naivety with such fantastic tales. However, even from the dawn of time as related in Aboriginal myth and legend, Australia has been a land of fantastical creatures such as the Rainbow Serpent and Bunyip. It always has been, and in the face of the extinction of many of the world's most unique species, thankfully remains, a land where the wild things are.



Michelle Witton studied Arts/Law at Sydney University and was awarded a Commonwealth Trust scholarship to Cambridge, where she was an actor / writer with the comedy revue 'Footlights'. Michelle trained as an actor at Guildford School of Acting and RADA. Her screen work includes 'The Bill' and 'Dr Willoughby' (ITV) with Joanna Lumley. Her work has previously been published in TNT Magazine and the Sydney Morning Herald.

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