Getting away from it all

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Abstract
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Getting Away From It All

Australian folklore is often bundled together with some kinds of literature as part of the enterprise of seeking out distinctive national characteristics, but it's very different from the triumphalist vision of the 'Advance Australia Fair' kind of nationalism. If we look at collections like Bill Wannan's *The Australian*, we are struck by all the defeat and desperation, with people making the best of a bad lot, and with sad cow-cockies and various bush oddballs struggling to survive. I shall quote one joke as typical:

An old bagman was tramping across a station property, when the station owner appeared in his utility truck, travelling in the same direction.

'Like a lift?' the owner called out.

'No flamin' fear!' said the bagman. 'You open yer own gates.'

We notice here a wariness behind the deflating humour: both literally and metaphorically, the swaggie is not going to be taken for a ride. This attitude isn't really negative; 'defensive' or 'minimalist' would be better words to describe it, but it is not at all like the positive, confident optimism displayed in the literature of national aspiration. The two don't really come from the same stable, though they are usually thrown in together. Where, then, do they originate?

Settlers in new societies have, broadly speaking, two opposite impulses: one is the positive aim of creating a new world which is better than the old one, perhaps an improved replica of it, perhaps better because utterly different, but anyway the civilizing venture of founding a new society, even a new civilization, is invoked. The second impulse is to draw the opposite lesson: because the old world has failed, the emigrant is too world-weary to go through the struggle again. The reason for emigration is to remove himself from all society, not only in the old world, but from society in the new country as well. He wants to get it out of his hair once and for all. At the first sign of pressure, an instinctive tendency to withdraw and to shrink back into privacy and non-caring comes into play. Paradise consists in letting nothing start up. This is one way of
describing 'getting away from it all'. Perhaps the best description is found in D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*:

Richard found he never wanted to talk to anybody, never wanted to be with anybody. He had fallen apart out of the human association.... This speechless, aimless solitariness was in the air. It was natural to the country. The people left you alone. They didn’t follow you with their curiosity and their inquisitiveness and their human fellowship. You passed, and they forgot you. You came again, and they hardly saw you. You spoke, and they were friendly. But they never asked any questions, and they never encroached. They didn’t care. The profound Australian indifference, which still is not really apathy. The disintegration of the social mankind back to its elements.

Both impulses — to start afresh, and to retire from strife — have been apparent in Australia, and we oscillate between them. But their representation in both history and literature has not been in proportion to their respective strength and influence; I think that the impulse to withdraw has been more profound but less prominent. The first impulse is recorded in history and in much nationalist literature: the sons of the south will banish the old world errors and wrongs and lies, and will build a paradise here. There is the promise of a great and glorious future. Spontaneous improvement will make our land an exemplar to others. But the confident, optimistic temper of such beliefs can never provide a full explanation of Australian experience. Dad and Dave hardly exemplify it. Australia has been a harsh and disillusioning country as well as an enticing one, and over the decades a shoulder-shrugging, failure-absorbing temperament has been developed to meet these conditions. Phrases like 'she'll be apples' and 'no worries' cannot be elevated into patriotic slogans. The battler and the survivor are just as important as the Australia-promoter. Not everyone saw Australia as the last unspoiled land, the last chance for a new start. Others saw it as the last unspoiled wilderness, and wanted to retire and forget. But this movement has been recorded only intermittently in our literature.

We usually point to the reasons why people migrate as the main factor determining their attitude in a newly settled land. There are a number of good reasons why emigrants would see Australia as a refuge from the world:

Australia was at the other end of the earth. It was so far away that settlers had, in their minds, to make a permanent break — they would probably never go back, so they had to consciously blot out their past.
Australia's population had continually been replenished by people getting away from Europe's troubles. Last century, they came to avoid industrialization, famine and land clearances in the British Isles; after 1945 they came to get away from a war-torn Europe.

Now while there is a whole literature on reasons for migration, I want to pass over these factors quickly, in order to emphasize that what happened to immigrants and their descendants after they got here — irrespective of why they came — has been the greatest determining factor in producing the desire to see Australia as, in Kenneth MacKenzie's terms, *The Refuge*.

There are factors reasonably particular to Australia. In comparing our experience with the U.S.A., Graeme Turner has written: 'Theirs was a mission of hope, ours the ordeal of exile.' The United States was founded with a purpose, and its constitutional documents enshrine certain basic beliefs — 'We hold these truths...' and so on. But being a convict dump, no similar sense of purpose accompanied our foundation. Convicts hardly regarded Australia under its utopian aspect. George Dunderdale's description of 'the Government Stroke' in *The Book of the Bush* is a vivid example of this:

>'The Government Stroke' is a term often used in the colonies, and indicates a lazy and inefficient manner of performing any kind of labour. It originated with the convicts. When a man is forced to work through fear of the lash, and receives no wages, it is quite natural and reasonable that he should exert himself as little as possible. If you were to reason with him, and urge him to work harder at, for instance, breaking road metal, in order that the public might have good roads to travel on, and show him what a great satisfaction it should be to know that his labours would confer a lasting benefit on his fellow creatures; that, though it might appear a little hard on him individually, he should raise his thoughts to a higher level, and labour for the good of humanity in general, he would very likely say, 'Do you take me for a fool?'

We see here the beginning of several traits common in Australian folklore: contempt for authority, indifference to the common good, improvisation at best and bludging at worst, a mortal fear of being taken for a ride, and a general scepticism and suspicion, all contained in the inverted humour of the phrase 'The Government Stroke'. In literature we have the creation of emancipated convict Judd in *Voss*. He has suffered a lot, and any easy optimism has long since been burned out of him. He is hard, flinty yet adaptable — Australia has reduced him to his elements. He survives, having 'lived beyond grief'. Judd is a type of the resigned
and undemonstrative early Australian produced by conditions in the colony.

Like the convict system, exploration failed to make the country cohere. In America, an emigrant moving across the country always knew he was heading somewhere. But on an island, there is only one way to go — inwards — and there was little or nothing in the middle. Once off the thin, fertile, coastal rim, things thinned out. This is one theme of Hope’s and McAuley’s poetry in the 1940s, and of Voss in the 1950s.

The traveller is always going away from somewhere, but never to anything. The vastness of the continent dissipated energies rather than concentrated them. The population was too thinly spread to counter these centrifugal pressures.

Following on exploration, we see in literature a restless moving on to find some remoter spot in which to live out one’s days untroubled. After alluvial gold ran out, most settled down on small farms or in provincial towns, but literature boosted the minority, the ‘Lone Hand’ fossicker following the rush that never ended. Similarly, when the small farms failed, most settled down in cities, but literature celebrated the minority who became itinerant outback workers. When the cities of the east coast were industrialized (that is, Europeanized), the search for yet unspoiled paradises went further afield — Lawson to W.A. and N.Z., E.J. Brady to Mallacoota, and finally some even went to Paraguay, which is just about as far away as you can get. There are images of this restless moving out in our folk mythology — like the idea of ‘The Black Stump’, which is always further out than you are at present, or the expression ‘Head for the Hills’ when there is danger (but the hills are hardly a refuge now, since they’re filled with iron, coal, bauxite, shale, oil, copper, etc. which a resource-deprived world now enviously casts its eyes upon).

The land, whether balmy or harsh, induced retreat and withdrawal; living in the great flat plains country made people unwind and forget their cares. You could easily lose yourself in it. The land exhausted you and evacuated your emotions. Only enough energy to keep yourself going was needed as you imperceptibly slowed down to its pace. Vance Palmer wrote of ‘the dreamy indolence of the day’. You retained a certain innocence by rejecting experiences outside your context. Retreat into a timeless present, with neither hope nor nostalgia, and amnesia about the rest, made life at worst bearable and at best quite pleasant. This is the atmosphere of many bush novels like The Passage and Working Bullocks, as well as Bean’s On the Wool Track about Western N.S.W. Today we feel this even more in the wheatlands country of Western Aus-
Australia. Furphy described the inland plains as 'grave, self-centred, subdued', qualities which not only describe the country but also those who inhabited and adapted to it.

But Australia was just as much, perhaps more, experienced as a harsh and difficult place which defeated those who tried to live in and farm it. Life in the bush often had an disintegrating effect on the personality, as we can see with Mrs Spicer in the Joe Wilson series:

She had an expression like — well, like a woman who had been very curious and suspicious at one time, and wanted to know everybody's business and hear everything, and had lost all her curiosity, without losing the expression or the quick suspicious movements of the head. I don't suppose you understand. I can't explain it any other way. She was not more than forty.

Being 'past caring' is an extreme or ultimate form of getting away from it all — you are too exhausted, beaten and weary to care. In general, we can say (and this applies to the city as well as the bush) that failure, and the disillusionment that went with it, blunted the optimism that many people brought to Australia. Such experiences produced many refugees from hope, and increased the numbers and influence of those who resigned themselves to a reduced life here. Vincent Buckley, in his introduction to Brian Matthews' book on Lawson The Receding Wave, has written of such people:

Often they were adults whom deprivation had made almost childish, or at least capable of entering easily into a child's peculiar seriousness. They were radically disappointed men, and they had had to learn humanity through endurance. The result was a mixture of stoicism, sadness, and a sense of decency tinctured with remoteness.

How different such people were from the raucous and extroverted image of the allegedly typical Australian.

I want now to describe three important characteristics of those who were 'grave, self-centred, subdued'. The first is the retreat back to the individual. Originally the whole country was to be independent, separate, self-sufficient (and so on); then this shrank back to the family farm, which was a cosy little world with the same qualities; then, after this failed, it shrank back further to the individual, who was to contain within himself these virtues, which were being denied elsewhere. But this retreat to the individual should not be confused with today's search for self-identity; it was not a bid to understand yourself, but a wish to discard the burden of consciousness itself. You were withdrawing into
yourself, but at the same time you were getting away from yourself. You dissolved the firm outlines of your personality by merging with the background and so losing yourself. Australia was release — release from the world, release from society, and ultimately release from the self. Lawrence has many images of this shedding of the self, 'the strange falling away of everything', the obliteration of consciousness.

The second characteristic follows on from the first. The desire for release from everything is not a carefully worked out view of the world or a set of propositions; it is not a point of view, but the absence of a point of view, and, even more importantly, the prevention of a point of view. Lawrence once again: 'They've got no will except to stop anybody else from having any.' To be 'past caring', to say, as Lawson does, 'It doesn't matter much. Nothing does', to believe that 'she'll be right, mate' and in general these attitudes of shoulder-shrugging resignation, are a form of blotting everything out; in its ultimate state, it is a constant, applied amnesia which prevents questions arising.

Various commentators have tried to fit such peculiar Australian attitudes into some ideology, such as romanticism, existentialism, nihilism, or modernism. But, however much elements of these may be present, it is not an intellectual position at all. Our 1890s writers weren't antipodean cousins of Dostoievsky and Kafka. Our writers faced a situation marked by the absence of power and social forces; the European writers became nihilists or existentialists because they were overwhelmed by an excess of power and social forces. Not to experience something is quite different from rejecting something you have experienced. We are told that Australian attitudes are cognate with Camusian existentialism. A phrase like 'It doesn't matter. Nothing does' goes against the whole tenor of Camus' life and writings, which was to keep trying to find meaning in a world which persistently refused to reveal a coherent answer. This has nothing in common with basking in the absence of answers. Using the vocabulary of the extremities of the European psyche over the past century imports an inappropriate angst into local attitudes, and may give them a spurious grandeur.

A third characteristic follows on from the first two, and that is: silence. If you are disillusioned, and have retreated and wish merely to survive, you lapse into silence. You have no position to expound, nor any urge to speak at all. You just sink back into yourself — and forget.

Now, why emphasize these characteristics - silence, and the lack of any ideological position or strong individual consciousness? Firstly, I think that many ordinary Australians came to be like this. We can think of
Stan and Amy Parker in *The Tree of Man* as people of this kind — not argumentative, gregarious, and full of great hopes and all sorts of views about the country, as the typical Australian is supposed to be, but fairly quiet, private, withdrawn and defensive. Such ordinary Australians constituted, in the literal sense of the phrase, ‘the silent majority’.

Because they were silent, their experiences and their trials are underrepresented in the historical record. They are also underrepresented in literature. The nationalists were very articulate, they had many views, and they went into print a lot (and as a result we can read them today). They claimed to express the longings of ordinary Australians, and we have tended to take this claim at face value. But they may have been at the centre of things by self-acclaim. In temperament they were quite different from the ordinary Australians they claimed to represent.

I shall give one example of this underrepresentation. Take the question of the small-farm ideal — Australia as a nation of small farmers, unlocking the land, the selection acts, and so on. Here there are two different failures, which are quite separate. The first failure was the failure to get a block, because of imperfect selection acts, dummying, peacocking, and other loopholes exploited by squatters and their agents. The second failure was the inability, by and large, of those who got blocks to make a go of it.

The first failure — to get a block — is well-known in the historical record because there were popularists who denounced these injustices at the time; the diddling of selectors is known to every schoolchild, and is, quite rightly, part of our national consciousness. The second failure is more important, but less known. For various reasons, the farms decayed slowly: there was no dramatic collapse, just slow dilapidation, which is very disintegrating personally. The men had to find work elsewhere, the family unit broke up, eventually people left for the provincial towns and coastal cities. But those to whom this was happening didn’t speak up about it. There were no protests and no urban agitators. The families who stayed and prospered write the local histories of their districts today — those who left are usually unrecorded. Their plight is remembered today, if at all, only in a subterranean way.

There is little literature squarely describing the collapse of the small farms — it was too hard to bear. The victims themselves were silent. Most was written not by the struggling selectors, but by their children. The most famous example is Lawson’s early stories. In a recent anthology of western district poetry, *Meeting of Sighs*, there is a poem called ‘The Selectors’ by Emily Kealy, which includes the following stanzas:
They ploughed and sowed, they reaped, they mowed, they beat the bush fires out.
They suffered loss when waterholes were dried in years of drought.

They ploughed to break the stubborn soil
down where the claypan dips,
And dust and sweat was in their eyes,
and salt sweat on their lips.

In the prime of life, with health and strength,
they got the land, and then,
After years of toil and strife, they left it broken men.

The children left the old bush homes when farming ceased to pay,
Some settled down on other blocks, some wandered far away.

With broken hearts when ruin came,
they saw them leave the door,
And then one roof, too well they knew would shelter them no more.

We sow for gain, then reap for loss those two links in the chain;
But when sorrows break the links of life, they never mend again.

Failure is very hard to face, especially in new countries, as it goes against all the great expectations. What we often get in literature and folklore is not the stark failure itself, but its later results — the bush eccentrics, the swaggies and mad hatters, yarns about the great days of the past, the human flotsam and jetsam left around after the disaster. In this literature the original tragedy has been softened. In bush humour the hurt is ameliorated by turning it all into a joke. The metamorphosis of 'On Our Selection' into Dad and Dave is an example of this, literature moving into folklore. The victims become endearing oddities. Another way out was to divinize the outback. Another was to pretend all was still well. Lawson wrote of his fellow 1890s poets: "The more the drought bakes them, the more inspired they seem to become." In other words, the worse things got, the rosier the picture they painted (this applied to Lawson himself later on). Much of this utopian literature is not a description of reality, but a compensation for it. In new countries, failure is rendered socially invisible:
Never admit the pain,
   Bury it deep;
Only the weak complain,
   Complaint is cheap.

Cover thy wound, fold down
   Its curtained place;
Silence is still a crown,
   Courage a grace.9

The public took up those parts of literature and folklore where the grief had been made comfortable and accommodated. Popular opinion readily accepted the brave face put on things. In David Walker's terms, the dream triumphed over the disillusion.

Nationalism and 'getting away from it all' do, however, have a good deal in common. Both favour an insulated and independent existence, one at a national, and the other at a personal level. In normal times, they exist in opposition to each other. Withdrawal subverts overt expressions of patriotism and exists subterraneously, as a kind of nationalism sans doctrines. But in times of crisis, the two combine: the silent individual now needs to express himself, and relies on conventional nationalism to do this. For example, in the Second World War, everyone noticed the great unanimity of the Australian people under the threat of invasion, but there was little visible and verbose patriotic expression, and little of the adventurist rallying cries of previous wars. Vance Palmer in his article 'Battle' (in Meanjin 1942) explained this by making the connection between the two explicit:

If Australia had no more character than could be seen of its surface, it would be annihilated as surely and swiftly as those colonial outposts white men built for their commercial profit in the east — pretentious facades of stucco that looked imposing as long as the wind kept from blowing. But there is an Australia of the spirit, submerged and not very articulate, that is quite different from these bubbles of old-world imperialism. Born of the lean loins of the country itself, of the dreams of men who came here to form a new society, of hard conflicts in many fields, it has developed a toughness all its own. Sardonic, idealistic, tongue-tied perhaps, it is the Australia of all who truly belong here.11

Palmer calls this 'an Australia of the spirit' and it only coheres in a more-than-individual form when the perimeter of the paradise has to be defended.

Ultimately, the desire to withdraw needs a protector to keep others out: that is why Lawrence pointed out that is not really apathy. Some agency is needed to ensure that the hermetically-sealed capsule of self-
protection is not punctured. Ordinary Australians, being private and apolitical, have to shelter under someone else's activities. Last century the nationalists provided the verbal smokescreen under which the mass of Australians settled down. This century, conservatives of the Bruce-Menzies type became the protectors, promising calm and stability, with no threats looming on the horizon and with little internal interference. This leads to an anomaly: Australians left bureaucrats free to do the work for them, which increased the bureaucrats' power enormously. Thus Australia is at once a highly bureaucratized and a highly privatized society. It is anti-government in attitude, which allows it to be over-governed in reality.

So withdrawal has two sides: indifference, but also a wary defence of that condition. How this is achieved on a personal level is best seen in Russell Drydale's familiar painting 'Moody's Pub'. One's immediate im-

Russell Drysdale, 'Moody's Pub', 1941.
pression is to say that the characters here are beaten, resigned survivors, with the stuffing knocked out of them from their hard and deprived life — and so they are. But there is something else present in their demeanour: they stand there watching the tourist or the painter (or us who are intruding on them) with a show of quiet, truculent defiance. They are warning outsiders to keep their distance and to keep out of their hair. Though living in a reduced state, their last comfort is freedom from interference, and that is not easily going to be taken away from them.

The desire to withdraw and retire is present in the cities this century, but it appears in different guises and is, therefore, more difficult to detect. Australians restlessly moved around the continent last century, but at one stage most gave this up, and huddled together in the coastal and provincial cities. This was also a form of retreat and withdrawal, and a giving-up of any great hopes of a new and different life in Australia. Joseph Furphy expressed this feeling in 'The Gumsucker's Dirge':

Sing the evil days we see, and the worse that are to be,
With such fortitude as sorrow will allow —
We are crumpled side by side, in a world no longer wide,
And there is no Up the Country for us now.11

In the cities you can't merge back into nature and you can't escape contact with people. But this can be explained; as Vincent Buckley has pointed out, withdrawal was 'a function not so much of loneliness in the physical sense as of psychological distance from the structures of civilization'.12 This psychological distance was maintained by having a thick protective outer shell around the individual, which let nothing in — and nothing out either. The personality was insulated from outside influences. The true identity was hidden away; Lawrence called this 'the withheld self. So you could be sociable without contributing to society. As De Tocqueville put it, 'as for his transactions with his fellow-citizens, he may mix among them, but he sees them not; he touches them, but does not feel them'.15 The trouble with this is that the withheld self can wither away into nothingness. Retreat in the cities can run down into simply giving up, and can become the basis for the inert privacy of the suburbs, 'the faint sterility that disheartens and derides'.14

One form of insulation was words. In the cities you cannot be silent, but words can be used not as a vehicle of communication, but as a barrage to ward others off and keep yourself intact. Words were often used to enclose, not to disclose. Often they had no meaning in themselves, they just babbled along on the surface forming a barrier to communication.
Mrs Everage spurts out her strings of clichés like this. Such talk is often disconcerting to migrants, who take time to realize that the content may not matter very much. As Mary Rose Liverani’s family learnt (in *The Winter Sparrows*):

> It was difficult to differentiate one from the other, for their speeches were all formulaic, and set phrases were punctuated with niggling little irruptions of laughter that made you drop your eyes. It took time to work out that words should be discarded as identity markers. 15

Speech could be just verbal insulation, which allowed you to disguise what you really felt, or to disguise the fact that you felt nothing at all.

D.H. Lawrence arrived in Australia at the right time (the early 1920s) and in the right places (Sydney and Perth and their outskirts) to observe the people as they settled down in the cities and coastal towns. He must have been extraordinarily perceptive, for in a matter of months he went through (at lightning speed, but absorbing it all perfectly) the series of reactions to the country which collectively have taken the people one hundred and fifty years. Like many immigrants, Lawrence was restless and looking for something new: he expected to find Australia a new world, free from the pressures and tight control of the old one. But as soon as he arrived he understood that he had been wrong; his famous early passages on the Western Australian bush create a sense of ‘that peculiar lost weary aloofness of Australia’.

All through *Kangaroo*, a hastily written novel, Lawrence strains to find words and symbols and images for that elusive quality of absentness, vacancy, unconcern, blankness he found so powerful in Australia. These passages constitute the most thoroughgoing attempt to define the ingrained Australian tendency to withdraw under pressure:

> Australia has got some real positive indifference to ‘questions’, but Europe is one big wriggling question and nothing else. A tangle of squibbles.

> He left off kicking himself, and went down to the shore to get away from himself. After all, he knew the endless water would soon make him forget. It had a language which spoke utterly without concern of him, and this utter unconcern gradually soothed him of himself and his world. He began to forget...

> What was the good of trying to be an alert conscious man here? You couldn’t. Drift, drift into a sort of obscurity, backwards into a nameless past. And an old, old indifference, like a torpor invades the spirit.

> Was the land awake? Would the people waken this ancient land, or would the land put them to sleep, drift them back into the torpid semi-consciousness of the world of the twilight. 18
Lawrence was at first tempted to stay and commit himself to Australia since 'it seemed so free, an absence of any form of stress whatsoever. No strain in any way, once you could accept it.' At first he found this attractive and relaxing but gradually, and somewhat against his inclinations, he was forced to conclude that the attitude had serious limitations.

Lawrence had come here to get away from his European consciousness, and he was seeking a more inclusive consciousness, such as he had experienced in Cornwall. But Australia, he came to realize, was the absence of consciousness, and that he could not abide. The sheer vacancy of life was a double-edged freedom. It was friendly and pleasant, but external and superficial. Inside there was nothing, no consciousness, no soul. Lawrence saw that in getting away from it all, you were ultimately getting away from yourself. Lawrence decided not to stay, as the country was so strong that 'it would lure me quite away from myself'. So he left to seek his deeper consciousness elsewhere, while acknowledging that Australia would be a nice place to retire to after his life's quest was over.

The two novels best describing the mentality are, in my opinion, Lawrence's *Kangaroo* and White's *The Tree of Man*. They work in opposite ways. Lawrence's approach is analytic — he simply keeps telling us what he thinks about it (through the medium of Richard Somers), which is why *Kangaroo* is so easy to quote from. White, on the other hand, creates the feeling through the lives of the Parkers, gradually, over the whole course of the novel. Both novelists have mixed feelings about it. They acknowledge how pleasant it is and its advantages. But both have reservations.

Withdrawal has limitation in both time and space. It can work over one generation, but a man in this condition has little to bequeath to his children, and even less ability to communicate it. Retreat in the country can be rewarding, but once removed from this source, it withers from lack of replenishment. In the cities, there is plenty to retire from, but nothing to retire into. Solitariness is not a fruitful, or even a natural, urban virtue. Both these limitations are evident in the lives of the Parker family in *The Tree of Man*. Stan and Amy Parker are an ordinary couple living a quiet life on a small farm. Although they barely talk to each other, an adequate though reduced life is possible for them through their absorption in nature and through an awareness of the significance of certain small but special things that happen to them. But because they are so self-contained and inarticulate, they cannot pass this life on. The father feels remote from his son, Ray, as the mother does from her daughter, Thelma. As the children drift to the city, the small intimations
of immortality available to their parents are lost to subsequent generations. The Parkers’ way of life ends with the parents, except for one grandchild, who understands.

In conclusion, we can say that ‘getting away from it all’ does make Australia a pleasant place, especially in a time when so many areas of life are being dragged into the arena of public concern. But in the long run it can too easily cross the fine line separating it from merely giving up, and become a balm which legitimizes failure and defeat. The happy man (‘beatus ille’) in Europe retired from active life to contemplate nature and to see in it analogies to the whole of creation, to rest and restore his energies so that he might once again participate in the world of men and affairs. The Australian version is so loose and defensive that it can lack new sources of inspiration and sustenance, and simply peter out into nothingness. This may partly explain our recurrent worry that there is something missing here, and that a full life can’t be lived in Australia.

‘Getting away from it all’ produces a society which is resilient and adaptive. It absorbs threats. The U.S. poet Kennet Rexroth said when he visited Australia:

> Of course, in Australia you have a homogeneous society, with a largely classless and very dense structure, so you don’t get the literature of alienation. What is there to alienate from? If some Paris intellectual came to chop into your structure it would just close behind the sword. It is a low-pressure utopia here.¹⁷

This makes Australia a much more complex country than it seems on the surface, hard to interpret and baffling to outsiders. Things can’t always be taken at their face value. Content and meaning are not connected in a straight-forward way. Anomalies abound. The attempt to undermine everything makes analysis difficult.

Getting away from it all constitutes a kind of anti-tradition running through Australian history. It explains why our folklore is full of suspicion and of authority, demolishing or undercutting humour, rubbishing and other forms of verbal banter, a certain lack of ambition (or at least a shyness about expressing it) and so on. These attitudes come from defeat and disillusion, and are stronger than the more publicized attitudes of triumphalist optimism, of which they are not really a part. They have been more persistent and influential, and they explain the country better.
NOTES


