Chapter 1

Introduction – Going Away

In the Australian spring of 1946 the ocean liner *Orbita* left Sydney carrying a variety of travellers. A small number were setting out on the grand tour of what remained of Europe. Some were English people returning home. Others were young Australians in search of adventure or a career. One of them was the 26-year-old Reginald Leo McKern. An amateur actor at May Holling-worth's Metropolitan theatre in Sydney, he had also had a professional role in a J. C. Williamson theatres performance of the play *Uncle Harry*. Behind lay other short-lived vocations: an adolescent career in engineering which had looked less promising since he had lost an eye in an industrial accident at the age of 15; an unhappy army experience; an unsuccessful marriage to a Sydney painter which had only lasted 18 months; and a minor career in radio serials and soaps. When Leo McKern arrived in Liverpool with two pounds and ten shillings in his pocket, enough for a train ticket to London (he had spent 325 pounds on the boat fare), he was not only beginning an early stage in his theatrical trajectory, he was also embarking on a journey beyond the geographical one he had already made.[1]

Like many young Australians, he had not made this big move solely in search of a career. Nor had he scraped together the fare just for the romance of Britain and Europe or the call of adventure or the London stage. Like many others in the war-swept 1940s, he pursued love. The actress Jane Holland, whom he had worked with at the Metropolitan theatre in Sydney, had left on an earlier ship, the *Stirling Castle*. McKern followed her in a variation on that other continuing Australian saga, 'For Love Alone'. They would soon be married in a registry office in the outer suburb of Bromley. Along with other

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young couples in the 1940s, in Britain and Australia, they began their life together living in a single room – first one in Goldhawk Road, Shepherds Bush, then another in Hampstead. They were ready, as much as circumstances allowed, to spread their wings.

That voyage of over 12 000 miles (or 20 000 kilometres) would become an increasingly common one in postwar Australia. Many young Australians made it, with or without the Onkaparinga long johns which McKern's parents had foisted on him, rightly it turned out, given the freezing winter of 1946–47. Their voyages were at the beginning of a rising wave of postwar movement to Britain, a strange and smaller reverse mirror of the even larger human flows south. However, McKern and Holland, and those who followed, continued an older tradition of expatriation.

Expatriation meant, for most Australians, a return to the British Isles. Ever since convicts had been transported for the term of their natural life, and settlers, soldiers and merchants had crossed the seas, the return to Britain had been culturally important. It was almost a natural inversion of the original banishment of convict exile or even just of colonial separation. For the earliest generations of settlers (but not for the Aboriginal people whose continent they had invaded), the islands of England, or its Celtic periphery, were home. The filial aspect of that link would be strengthened by continuing migration from Britain, still predominant in the era of the great European migration of the 1950s, as it had been over a century before.

The links across the world were maintained by sea. The 'Mother Country' and its distant settlements drew nearer in the era of the steamship, particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1867, and the telegraph connection in 1872. In the period of worsening international conflict around the turn of the century, also the era of the height of the romantic mythology of the British Empire, the ties became even closer.

The growing 'Australianist' sentiment amongst the native-born in the years leading up to Federation in 1901 might have arrested this 'imperial' tide. However, at the same time, with the era of the new imperialism, Britain was increasingly romanticised as 'Home'. British popular culture and imperial sentiment reinforced the emotional attachment to the imperial capital, London. Popular song and story, imperial rhetoric and display in schools celebrated the Union Jack, the heroes of Empire (Wolfe of Canada, Clive of India and Gordon of Khartoum), and a world mapped in imperial pink. The blood spilt in the Boer War of 1899–1902 and the Great European War (as it was sometimes then known) of 1914–18, and the rituals of Empire Day on May 24 and royal visits (1901, 1920) further tightened the bonds of the British Empire, as they would do for generations.[2]

In the twentieth century, more sophisticated Australian institutions, based on British models, British ideas and branches of British industry (in publishing as well as manufacturing) tightened the tie. The link, reinforced by the

export of Australian primary products to Britain, was now stronger than in the second half of the previous century, when Australians had looked more to the 'Bush' for their influences.

This tradition, slightly changed in character, reached its peak in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s. The ending of World War II allowed people to travel once again, and growing prosperity brought such travel within the reach of more of the population. Even during that peak, the character of 'returns' began to change. Despite strong ties with Britain, and their continuing status as 'British subjects', Australians felt a keener sense of identity, of their own, Australian nationality. In the era of transition, of the last and largest waves of expatriates, more and more of the returnees felt not British, nor British-Australian, but Australian, Australians living overseas. Others felt their identity was divided – they were Australian citizens but their passports designated them as 'British subjects'.

The significance of the expatriate myth in Australian culture, the story of Australians feeling the need to undertake an odyssey or 'return', has been explored in literature. It was a theme in Henry Handel Richardson's novel trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1930) and in several autobiographical and fictional accounts, including those of Stella Bowen and Christina Stead. The subject has recently attracted scholarly interest, at a time when the world and travel have become even more diverse. K. S. Inglis explored it in 'Going Home: Australians in England, 1870–1900' while Ros Pesman, in *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad* (1996), addressed the broader subject of travel by women.[3] Several recent academic studies, novels and short stories have pursued Australians as travellers and tourists and the Australian expatriate experience from Paris to Tuscany.[4] Jim Davidson's *Lyrebird Rising* and *Kathleen O'Connor: Artist in Exile* by Patrick Hutchings and Julie Lewis tell, respectively, the stories of two Parisian careers: those of Louise Hanson-Dyer, who created the Oiseau-Lyre (or Lyrebird) record label, and Kathleen O'Connor, the Western Australian artist, on the other side of the Channel as well as the world. *An Antipodean Collection* (1993) brings together a more recent connection – with Tuscany – which has been important for a diversity of creative individuals including the painter Jeffrey Smart, and the writers David Malouf and Germaine Greer.[5]

A rich popular literature tells biographical, autobiographical and oral tales of expatriation. It includes Garry Kinnane's biography of George Johnston (1986), Charmian Clift's stories of the Johnston–Clift family life in Greece in the 1950s and 1960s; and Alister Kershaw's reminiscences of postwar Paris. Two collections – Clyde Packer's *No Return Ticket* (1984) by expatriates in North America and Europe, and several expatriate tales in Russell Braddon's anthology *Australia Fair?* (1984) – take the story forward. So do plays such as Hannie Rayson's *Hotel Sorrento* (1990), which later became a popular film, and Jack Hibberd's *Malarky Barks* (1983).[6]

Two books have addressed the most high-profile expatriates of the recent era. Christine Wallace's lively biography, *Greer: Untamed Shrew* (1997), captures Germaine Greer, while Ian Britain's *Once an Australian* (1997) paints a series of portraits of, by one reckoning, four talented 'Tall Poppies' or, by another, four 'professional Australians' on the larger stages of London and New York – Germaine Greer, Barry Humphries, Clive James and Robert Hughes. Both studies pursue the relationship between the individual experiences and the oeuvre of these talented media celebrities, performers and writers.

Despite this recent interest in the expatriate experience, absences are still more noticeable than presences. Distinguished Australian expatriates often do not appear in Australian biographical dictionaries, apparently 'written out' of Australian society. Nor has the Australian cultural history of the second half of the twentieth century yet been written. Geoffrey Serle's overview, *From Deserts the Prophets Come* (1973, 1987), charts the outline of the cultural coast. Several specialist studies in music, theatre, literature and art, as well as supporting symposia and reference books, pursue aspects of other areas. Biographical and critical studies are strong in some, but not all, fields. Australian cultural history is no longer a version of *terra Australis incognita* (an unknown great south land), and the myth of *terra nullius* has been refuted regarding culture (as it has long been refuted regarding culture in Australia before 1788). However, the map of the Australian cultural landscape from which the expatriates departed in the 1940s to the 1960s is still more one of outline than of detail.[7]

Filling in the gaps requires several maps. One might focus more closely on a particular artistic profession or movement, or on an individual creator or performer. Another might focus on the act of relocation itself, as demonstrated by the inhabitants of Australia, the most isolated and the most modern of all societies: deracinated, transplanted, immigrant, technological and urbanised. It might pursue the whole gamut of Australian travel and expatriation, from backpackers and group tourists to adventurers and settlers, to Europe, to North America and to Asia and beyond.

However, as an English-speaking society 'founded' by Britain, the relationship between former colony and former imperial centre is fundamental. It has long shaped Australian social institutions and ideology, cultural traditions and practices. In the postwar years 'cultured' Australians, like many American artists and intellectuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, often looked to Britain and Europe as the fount of their traditions.[8] As fundamentally different as Australian society is from that of England (or from the other parts of the British Isles), the influences and ideas derived from Britain have been powerful. Many are still important today.

Too often the cultural history of a society or the career of a talented individual is seen in simple terms. In Australia, dualism dominates. Two

opposed sets of terms describe the cultural history of the new world society and of the relationship of its leading creative talents to it, particularly the expatriates. On the one hand, different bodies and individuals look for an 'Australian identity' expressed in the arts – an 'Australian sound' or 'sounds Australian' in music, an 'Australian look' in television. Like the earlier bush or beach images of idealised Australia, such aspirations can involve a romantic conception of a national culture, or even a national essence.[9]

It is as if, since the cultural efflorescence of the 1970s, the ideal of the title of Geoffrey Serle's cultural history of Australia, *From Deserts the Prophets Come*, has been realised. A deeper and more sophisticated national culture had been created, although very different to the old 'Australian Legend' bush ideal. Serle's title draws on A. D. Hope's poem 'Australia', written in 1938, the year of the sesquicentenary of the landing of the First Fleet. In it the poet reflected on his country and its future:

> Hoping, if still from deserts the prophets come,
> Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
> Springs in this waste . . .

Yet, despite the important redefinitions of Australian culture and identity by the original Australians, the indigenous Aboriginal people, and by elements of the pluralist settler society, and despite the influence of postmodernist ideas of play supplanting meaning in a world of shifting identities, the dream remains strong. It has become all the more compelling in times of incessant change, in a world which is international and global as well as national and local. It is not, however, as the expatriates well know, the entire story.

The other story, an opposite or even antithetical tale, is equally romantic. It is the story of the talented individual and loner, a creative outsider, an Odysseus only able to realise his or her talents through their wandering. This romantic tale, informed by the Byronic adventurer myth and then the twentieth-century ideal of the artist as different, was reflected in the infatuation with the Bloomsbury group in some cultural milieux in the 1950s–60s. In the Australian context, the romantic story is often one of *from deserts the prophets escape*. From a land of provincialism and mediocrity, of materialism and even egalitarian repression of the different and the talented, the artists flee. Would time and experience reconcile these two essentialised ideals of artist and nation?

The life of a country and its culture and the careers of expatriate artists are more complex than such romantic simplifications will allow. It is the common role of creative artists and performers, those who leave and those who stay, to explore (often at a personal cost) moral, aesthetic and social questions. Many of those who stayed, as well as those who went, were committed

to their society, even as they were tortured by its contradictions. 'Nugget' Coombs, patron of the arts in Australia and the architect of government support for the arts from the 1940s to the 1970s, declared himself, in the words of the poet James McAuley, 'fitted to that land as the soul is to the body', even while he worked to reshape some aspects of Australian society.[10]

Expatriation increased the contradictions experienced by artists in general, and expatriates were often torn by their longing and their divided cultural and social selves. In the romantic tradition, their lives and their self-knowledge were won sometimes by suffering which could include the pangs of longing or even angst regarding their own identity. Sometimes love was expressed as frustration or even anger at the imperfections of the loved one – their country of origin.

These two romantic dualities, of national essence and artistic wanderers, have popular versions as well. In one version, the expatriates went to London because of an Australian colonial cultural cringe which inevitably assumed that the best was found overseas and that the Australian was inferior. In a variant of this theme, the cringe was *about* culture. Australia was a land of sport, leisure, agriculture, not artistic creativity. The colonial tradition associated Britain, especially London, with the mind and 'culture', Australia with matter and 'nature'. In the other version, the expatriates, whether viewed from positive or negative positions, were 'tall poppies'. They might be either talented individuals, deserving of recognition, who had had to leave the country to get it, or merely self-important 'ex-patriots' who had 'got too big for their boots' and 'needed to be cut down to size'.[11]

This book will show that, however appealing the romantic polarities, the complex truth of being an Australian and an Australian expatriate in the twentieth century was more interesting and more profound than either idealised position. Reality was much more difficult than simple images associating Europe with standards and culture, and Australia with body and sun.

Expatriation ... An Australian Story

An ocean-going liner had long been a visual motif in Australian life, especially from the 1940s to the 1960s. Dramatic emotional scenes would occur as the great liners arrived and departed. Arriving, they carried a human cargo of immigrants who had just had their first sight of their new land. Departing, they took not only travellers and some returning immigrants, but thousands of young Australians who were setting out to 'see the world' or to pursue a career beyond what they saw as provincial Australia. The paper streamers, which joined the passengers to the shore crowds until the ship sailed away and then cut them 'like a hundred umbilical cords' (as Jill Neville recalled),

the farewell parties, the last hugs and kisses and the exchange of letters and addresses with those who had gone ahead were rituals of Australian adulthood. For many Australians, the overseas odyssey was central to their own coming of age. At the same time, the continued absence of so many talented young people would frustrate the nation's social, cultural and political development or, as some observers called it, Australia's 'Coming of Age'.[12] In the arts and intellectual life, was London's gain Australia's loss?

The great wave of expatriation to London and Europe after World War II, which this study focuses on, occurred during the last important stage of imperial–colonial relations. Although no longer a colony, Australia still seemed provincial, unable to appreciate the arts or to sustain full-time careers in them. Writers, artists, musicians and actors set out on a journey in search of new opportunities, while also following in the tracks of their predecessors. Their distinguished number had included the writer Henry Lawson, the painter Arthur Streeton and the singer Nellie Melba. The origins of the journey to the imperial centre and the old world lay in the derivative character of Australian culture and in the dependent colonial relationship of the Australian settler societies to Britain.

The Australian experience after 1788 was not just that of six colonies of Great Britain. The colonies were also part of a larger entity – the greatest empire the world had seen. Improved communications led to colonial dependency in the arts and the loss of talent to the imperial centre becoming the norm. I have argued elsewhere that a key period in Australian history is that of 'Dominion Culture' from the late nineteenth century to World War II. In these years, named for Australia's formal status as an 'autonomous' 'Dominion' within the British Empire (a concept defined in 1926 and formally acquired through the Statute of Westminster in 1931), provincial orientation to the 'Mother Country' severely qualified the seeming national independence of Federation in 1901. (Australia did not ratify the statute until 1942, in the dark days of World War II.) Steamships, telegraph cables and later radio strengthened the colonial bonds of 'Empire'. Just as Australia produced wheat and wool, soldiers and sportsmen for 'export', in the arts 'the export of talent' to London had become commonplace.[13]

The Colonial Cultural Cringe

'Colonial' meant more than the division of artistic labour and capital between the imperial centre and the colonies, the latter providing audiences and young talent, but few career opportunities, except in popular variety. The word also carried the association of status inferiority which followed from it. Colonial often meant inferior, second rate, provincial and even crude. In the formal 'colonial' era, before Federation, critics found colonial beer insipid,

colonial wine undrinkable and colonial speech uncultured. In 1869, an observer remarked that 'the word "colonial" is often used to express disparagement; "colonial manners", for instance, is now and then employed as a synonym for roughness'.[14] Nor did such views disappear entirely in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1950s, the linguist A. G. Mitchell suggested that Australia was the only Anglo-Saxon community which was ashamed of having its own way of pronouncing the English language.[15] Even later in the century, Australians arriving in Britain were still being received as 'colonials', a term at best a form of amused condescension, at worst an expression of politely masked social and cultural contempt. In 1998, Kathy Lette, the ever outspoken Australian novelist and performer in London, remarked that Australians were still seen by the English as 'the Irish of the Pacific ... with some sort of recessive gene'.[16]

Australian social, cultural and professional institutions placed the English and British originals at the apex of the pyramid of status in the Dominion Culture. First, British training and development, later British and imperial honours, capped Australian achievements. Cultural industries were centralised in the metropolis of London, at the expense of the small capitals of the less populous colonial societies. This concentration frustrated and impeded the elaboration of cultural institutions in Australia – professional theatre companies and orchestras, book and music publishers. Cultural centralisation seemed to confirm that Australia was a frontier or bush society, oriented towards the pioneering emphasis on the physical, valuing material over cultural achievement. Expatriates were pulled to London by career possibilities in writing, music, theatre and journalism. Simultaneously, they were pushed away from Australia by the lack of such professional opportunities, by the unsophisticated level of development, and by the absence of an appreciative audience in Sydney or Melbourne, Brisbane or Perth, Hobart or Adelaide. A British elite view, shared by many Australians in the arts and the professions, was that the Australian cities were as much provincial extensions of London as were Bristol or Birmingham.

The colonial theme of intellectual frustration in Australia, of alienation from the country, is often central in the expatriate story. Distaste for Australia or alienation recurs often in Australian intellectual history, in part because of English children's books which taught a love of England and its country gardens. Shirley Hazzard, the expatriate novelist who chose European and American routes, recalled her 1930s–40s schooling in which literature 'had placed Australia in perpetual, flagrant violation of reality'. In suburban schools in Australian cities, girls were taught about Kew gardens, 'Come down to Kew in lilac time (it isn't far from London!)'. In opposition to the rich colour of English history, 'Australian history, given once a week only', was 'easily contained in a small book, dun-coloured as the scenes described'. In contrast, 'History itself proceeded, gorgeous, spiritualised, without a downward glance at Australia'.[17]

Implicit was a rejection of the wild beauties and subtle nuances of the 'Bush'. It often went deeper than the teaching of English flora rather than the beauties of the gum tree. Despite Dorothea Mackellar's expression in 1908 of poetic love for her 'sunburnt country', many colonial settlers had not come to terms with their land or with themselves. Henry Lawson sketched a disgruntled Australian in New Zealand who declared that Australia is 'only a mongrel desert ... The worst dried-up, God-forsaken country I was ever in ... I was born there. That's the main thing I've got against the darned country'.[18]

Like other 'colonials' around the world, Australian intellectuals felt the frustrations of being inferiors, far from the centre with which they sought to identify. Like 'educated' Africans and Indians in the era of the British Empire, like some Americans until the early twentieth century, they also dreamed of the mists and mystique of London, or, less often, Paris. Frantz Fanon's theory of the 'colonised' has partial applicability to the settler colonials of Australia and their cultural–social relationship to London and Britain. Fanon's analysis, with the word 'colonial' substituted for 'jungle' in the last sentence, may help explain the hesitancy of Australian cultural development:

> Every colonised people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority cultural complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards.

The qualification that Australia as a settler society was derived from the 'Mother Country', unlike the subject Aboriginal people whom the settlers had subjugated, is essential. Within a century and a half, however, 'white' Australia had acquired its own accent, and its own voice, if not a different language. Here the hierarchical relationship of imperial–colonial superiority and inferiority merges into a metropolitan–provincial relationship. 'There is the city, there is the country. There is the capital, there is the province', Fanon continues, noting that the Lyonnais in Paris has a similar problem.[19] Many Australians learned a colonial cultural cringe which demanded that they distance themselves from the uncultured tones of their Australian selves. Arthur Phillips' famous article, which introduced the term into Australian intellectual debate in the 1940s and 1950s, intensified awareness of an already familiar problem.[20] This habit of 'culturally cringing' associated status and significance with 'overseas', particularly with London achievement, influencing both the psychology of expatriation and of Australian cultural activity.

The problem for Australian creators and performers was partly structural. However, often their artistic frustration was emotionally expressed by expatriates as a tale of rejection, or of indifference, on the part of an uncultured

or uncaring country and its people. This was the economic cringe. Structures of production, or the lack of them, in the form of professional arts institutions offering training and employment, were the first problem. A parallel problem was that the dominant structures of prestige placed the highest status value, and therefore also monetary value, on imported performers and writers. To understand these two structural constraints, and the smaller market available to those creating at the periphery rather than the centre, it is necessary to look beyond simple views. The simple national maturation or 'coming of age' model, itself an inevitably colonial concept, is inadequate. Nor does a depiction of an uncultured, uninterested Australia adequately describe the reality. The continuing situation was one of under-development. (Geoffrey Serle utilises the more neutral 'delayed development' regarding the 1950s–60s.) Only over time would home-grown structures of production and prestige emerge. A larger question was that of how they would contend with the economies of scale, the celebrity status mechanisms and world markets in the subsequent eras of internationalisation and globalisation.

A recognition of these structural factors does not deny the often bitter historical reality. The relationship between the writer and the country had always reflected the inevitable ambivalence about Australia and London. Henry Lawson simultaneously looked down on 'the surplus little men of London journalism' who edited Sydney journals while having 'an ignorant contempt for Australia and all that was Australian', and yet sought London himself. He asked for assistance from the literary patron, the Governor Earl Beauchamp, to make the trip: 'The position of purely Australian literature is altogether hopeless in Australia – there is no market. The oldest and wealthiest Daily in Australia fills its columns with matter clipped from English and American magazines . . . Nothing "goes" well here that does not come from or through England'.[21] Often the very attempt to fit into English mores led to a divided self, to being torn between a London style and an Australian persona, whether expressed in accent or speech, dress or manners. For expatriate artists, outward renunciation of their own country, which did not offer a career in their chosen profession, was one way of attempting to resolve the inner division. Lawson's London episode from 1900 to 1902 had mixed results. He wrote the impressive 'Joe Wilson' stories about the bush while there, and received good reviews. However, after his return to Australia only two years later his ongoing decline continued, partly due to personal difficulties, including a failing marriage.

The very term 'expatriate' and the related term 'exile' express these contradictions. Many later, post-World War II, expatriates felt themselves refugees from Australian culture and society, and sometimes from the conservative politics of the Cold War and the Vietnam War eras in general. However, most were cultural expatriates who departed voluntarily, despite the enforced separation that distance, length of journey and cost entailed in the era of sea