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978-0-521-62978-2 - When London Calls: The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to Britain

Stephen Alomes

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When London Calls

The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to Britain

For thousands of young Australians the tearful dockside farewell was a rite of passage as they boarded ships bound for London.

For some the journey was an extended holiday, but for many actors, painters, musicians, writers and journalists, leaving

Australia seemed to be the only path to personal and professional fulfilment. This book is a collective biography of those people who found themselves categorised as expatriates – people such as Leo McKern, Dame Joan Sutherland, Sir Sidney

Nolan, Barry Tuckwell, Don Banks, Phillip Knightley, John Pilger, Peter Porter, Richard Neville, Jill Neville and ‘megastars’ Barry Humphries, Germaine Greer and Clive James. The book tells of choices they made about career and country, yet it is also a cultural history that traces shifts in the complex relationship between Australia and Britain, as the supposed colonial backwater began to develop its own cultural identity.

Stephen Alomes is a Senior Lecturer in Australian Studies at Deakin University. A Harold White Fellow at the National Library of Australia in 1991, he is the author and co-editor of several books. His publications include *A Nation at Last? The Changing Character of Australian Nationalism* (1988), *Australian Nationalism: A Documentary History* (1991), and *High Mark: Australian Football and Australian Culture* (1998). In 1983 he was co-founder of the Australian Studies Association.

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For Kate, Rosemary, Murray and Alan

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Abbreviations

AAA	Australian Artists Association
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission (later Corporation)
AETT	Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust
AIF	Australian Imperial Forces
AMA	Australian Musical Association
AMFL	Australian Musical Foundation in London
ANU	Australian National University
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
B&B	bed and breakfast
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
CIS	Commonwealth Investigation Service
Con	New South Wales Conservatorium of Music (later Sydney Conservatorium)
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA)
JCW	J. C. Williamson's Ltd
MP	Member of Parliament
MSO	Melbourne Symphony Orchestra
MTC	Melbourne Theatre Company
NIDA	National Institute of Dramatic Art
P&O	Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company
POW	prisoner of war
QSO	Queensland Symphony Orchestra

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R&R	rest and recreation
RADA	Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (UK)
RSL	Returned Services League
semi	semi-detached house
SAW	Society of Australian Writers
SSO	Sydney Symphony Orchestra
TSO	Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra
UTRC	Union Theatre Repertory Company (Melbourne)

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When London Calls

They leave us – artists, singers, all –
When London calls aloud,
Commanding to her Festival
The gifted crowd.

She sits beside the ship-choked Thames,
Sad, weary, cruel, grand;
Her crown imperial gleams with gems
From many a land

From overseas, and far away,
Come crowded ships and ships –
Grim-faced she gazes on them; yea,
With scornful lips.



The student of wild human ways
In wild new lands; the sage
With new great thoughts; the bard whose lays
Bring youth to age;

The painter young whose pictures shine
With colours magical;
The singer with the voice divine –
She lures them all.

From Victor Daley 'When London Calls'

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Preface

When I sat down with the Australian actor Alan White and a tape recorder on a greyish London day in 1982, I thought that I was beginning a short piece of research about Australian actors and writers who had gone to London in the 1950s and stayed. It was something which might complement my other research on how the British press viewed Australia. Geoff Bolton, then head of the Australian Studies Centre at the University of London, had given me the original idea while I was attached to the Centre on study leave. Over the next few months the small project began to expand; it continued to expand for many years.

After I had returned to Australia it began to be clear to me that the subject of expatriation spoke to many other Australian experiences. It also took me back to earlier personal events: to my own 'big trip', departing on the Chandris Lines ship *Australis*, and then 'Greyhounding' around North America, hitchhiking Western Europe, and working for £20 a week plus luncheon vouchers in an office just off Charing Cross Road, while living in deepest Muswell Hill; then to Bangkok, Singapore and the Nullarbor Plain by air, sea and land on the way home. Although coming from a Tasmanian family which goes back to the first colonial settlement, the research called to mind an earlier sense of Tasmanian expatriates on the mainland – from footballers to artists and public servants – and then my own experience in becoming one of them. I looked back to my father's 'big trip', from 1939 to 1945 with the Sixth Division AIF, to the Middle East, North Africa, Greece, Britain and New Guinea. And forward, to an overpowering fascination with my own changing society, one conceived in international and comparative terms. Perhaps Australians, or some Australians, are, as Charmian Clift

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wrote, like the albatross, natural fliers who often 'wander further ... dare higher ... accept risk and hazard as part of the exhilaration of getting off the ground'.¹

In 1989, as interest in Australia grew in Britain and Europe, at a Commonwealth literature conference in Barcelona I shared a platform with the poet Peter Porter. The conference theme was 'A Passage to Somewhere Else', and I was introduced as the one who had not gone away, in contrast to the distinguished expatriate writer of an earlier generation.² By then I was seeing this project as both a group biography and a cultural history. The subject was not only the experiences of the expatriates, but the nature and history of the society they left. Of course this did not make the completion of the work easier. As it expanded, both in scope and in the number of subjects, as interviewees recommended that I talk to other expatriates, gave me their friends' phone numbers and suggested new approaches and extra subjects, the complications inherent in writing about the professional and personal lives of several groups of people over a period of years became more and more apparent. Sometimes it seemed that there was no effective way to understand the phenomenon, particularly across professions or periods, or that someone else 'must' be on my list. The demands of several other books called, some related and some not, including studies of contemporary Australian popular culture, Australian nationalism and contemporary France and French nuclear testing.

In the end I decided that the way to analyse the phenomenon was to tell the stories. This I have done, through my own lens, using the stories of the expatriates to explain Australian cultural history, and analysing Australian society from the 1940s on in explaining their experiences. These diverse individual stories are of compelling interest, both on their own and as they help reveal the complexities of expatriation and of Australian cultural history. Narrative or story – in theatre or opera, in fiction or in journalism, that other storytelling craft – is a wonderful vehicle for analysis. It has helped me to understand the shape and parameters of the cultural history of Australia and, to an extent, London, the great world city of the Sixties. This book also has something to say about the choices everyone makes in life – about jobs, people and places – even the choices we make by default, such as 'staying' in a place or a job. As reflected in the interviews drawn on in this study and in the many published sources cited, many of the expatriates made active choices, not all about country or city. Their decisions often included a choice to be freelancers. Many chose to work in a semi-independent relationship with cultural and professional institutions.

The stories of the expatriates introduced in this book are like the stories of many people in many fields of endeavour. In an era of globalisation (or, as the French term it, *uniformisation*) the human story matters all the more, despite attempts to replace it with statistical analysis or hyperconceptualisation. This

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story is a beginning, a door which might ideally lead to many other accounts of creative Australians – at home or away. Such stories might be told in many different ways – in biographies and autobiographies, or in studies of particular creative professions or individual works. This contribution seeks to sketch those stories, and the changing views and experiences of expatriates over half a century, while placing them in the context of Australian cultural history. Individual actions, which have their own subjective and personal validity, might also be seen as part of larger patterns, such as the epic story of the changing cultural relations between Australia and Britain, particularly London, over time.

Often, when people asked me that recurring question ‘What are you doing at the moment?’, I answered by mentioning the book about Australian expatriates in London. Their immediate response was ‘Oh, you mean Germaine Greer, Barry Humphries and Clive James’. (Some added John Pilger.) In a sense they were right, as these larger-than-life characters figure prominently in any such study. But this book is also about many other people besides this high-profile trio or quartet.

This book is about the experience of being an expatriate in London in the creative and performing arts. It focuses on several clusters of expatriates – in writing and journalism, the stage and music. As a result, other individuals – in politics and business, in law and medicine and in the universities – are not part of it. Even within the arts it would be no more possible to tell the story of every expatriate than it would be to tell the story of every Italian or every Briton who came to Australia.

This study does not concentrate solely on the many high achievers, the most well-known Australians, although their prominence makes them crucial in the story. Nor does it guillotine the period of expatriation. ‘Length of stay’ is not the sole criterion. Expatriates are those who think of themselves as expatriates rather than immigrants, those who keep up their relationship with the country from which they departed. That often public relationship self-selects them as expatriates for this study. The expatriate experience could be felt very intensely by some who only stayed briefly or became ‘serial commuters’ between London and Australia. Others, who became integrated into British society, rather like the British newcomers who settled into Australia, the ‘immigrants’, are generally outside my scope, even if the line between expatriate and immigrant is sometimes a fine one. Since this study is contemporary, those who gave their time and thoughts with generosity are more prominent than those who said ‘No’ – the publisher who was impossible to deal with (even by phone), and the conservative intellectual and the novelist living in the country, who both emphatically declared that they had no interest in the subject. One group, artists, figure only briefly in this study. Artists travelled often and widely across the world and Australia, but were rarely expatriates in London, despite significant major exceptions such as Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd.

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Many other Australians form part of this story, but as a backdrop and a chorus, such as the poetry, music and/or lager lovers of Earls Court to Fulham, at the Down Under Club and its successors, and those from even more respectable society. Just off stage are the Australians who made major contributions to important British institutions. Several served the Court of St James: Frederick Fox as Royal Milliner and Stuart Devlin, designer of Australia's decimal coinage, as the Royal goldsmith jeweller. Sir William Heseltine, as press secretary and then private secretary to the Queen, began the necessary process of the 'democratisation' of the monarchy in the 1960s, which would later, in a very different era, have unexpected and unfortunate results. Another rather detached and distant chorus resulted from institutional links between Australian 'colonial' elites and British society: rural and urban upper middle classes travelled to London and the Home Counties for 'the Season'; young Australian girls went to Swiss finishing schools, while other Australians, mainly male, were sent to do a first degree at Oxford or Cambridge. Intermarriage between pastoral wealth and English blue blood was one traditional imperial-colonial result of these patterns. Some later prominent individuals went to Britain to study or live. Malcolm Fraser was sent to Oxford, as was Rupert Murdoch, the son of the Australian press baron, Sir Keith Murdoch, while amongst several Australians who had moved into English society through marriage was Lady Dale Tryon, a fashion designer known as 'Kanga' and friend of Prince Charles.³ Other diverse Australian involvements in British life, from education to politics, while important, are outside the frames of reference of this study.⁴

In its own way the book pursues, in Lawson's words, 'the tracks we travel', but not usually those of the bush nor those along George Street or Collins Street. They are those of London. Along the Strand, up Charing Cross Road and Shaftesbury Avenue, down Fleet Street and Grays Inn Road (and stopping to drink cold lager at the Surrey Hotel opposite Australia House), performing at Covent Garden and Wigmore Hall, living in Notting Hill Gate, Holland Park, and sometimes Earls Court or Soho, around Russell Square and Kings Cross, and arriving at Tilbury, Waterloo or on the Piccadilly tube line from Heathrow.

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