

INTRODUCTION

Journeys

Blue plastic bags stuck to wire fences by an unrelenting wind. Streaked fibrocement and grey-green besser block. Spindly trees dying in the leaded dust. At the welfare centre women pick over the used clothes, pots and pans. On the community workers' pinboard directives about best practice crowd out and almost seem to mock fading notices for social justice workshops. Closed shops, old service stations selling ten-dollar stretch jeans and cigarettes 'at Queensland prices'. Wounded cars on blocks, dead ones in front yards. Broken beer bottles crunch underfoot outside the TAB. At least the newsagent promises to 'Tatts you out of here'.

Many accounts of places such as Inala, Broadmeadows and Mount Druitt begin and end with the same sense of desolation. Granted, there are tragedies and despair. You can't just wish away entrenched unemployment. You can't ignore the men who know they will never work again, the teenage boys who tell you they'll be overdosed or dead in a car crash before they're 20, the mothers, nervous, ashamed or simply resigned, collecting their emergency food parcels at the church hall. But nor can you ignore the sparks and flashes of invention and resilience: the young jobless fathers I saw in Mount Druitt who tenderly minded their babies outside Coles while their girlfriends finished their shifts, the Broadmeadows children's playgroup that Joan, Barbara and Geraldine helped turn into a language

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class for their Turkish and Iraqi neighbours, or the community meeting where Val and Lorraine laughingly made a new Inala out of plasticine and crêpe paper.

You can't turn the caricatures on their heads and argue that Inala, Broadmeadows and Mount Druitt are not impoverished, for some of their neighbourhoods and some of their people most definitely are. But you can choose to see and hear something different: stories about what is happening to many ordinary Australians and what they are making happen, stories they relish sharing and others they can hardly bear to tell. You can listen to Father Patrick Nolan, who came to Mount Druitt in 1980:

You know, you dare to read the signs of the times that are occurring here. Because they are signs that disturb the equilibrium, greatly so, and it takes a lot of guts.

This is a place of great prophecy. That's what I can see, a place of great prophecy. It's a disturbing place.

Prophecy is not a skill that most outsiders would ascribe to impoverished people. Yet it is the best description because they are living in a future others will not acknowledge is already here.

The mistake of many venturers – and the mistake that I made – is to think that you already know the story when what you must do is listen. I first began listening to people in Broadmeadows, Inala and Mount Druitt in 1993. I was then working on another book, *Good Times, Hard Times*, about the town of Elizabeth in South Australia. Established in the 1950s, Elizabeth became disadvantaged during the 1970s and 1980s as the relative prosperity of its first two decades of existence gave way to increasing unemployment and as its founder, the South Australian Housing Trust, was proving itself unable to resist the forces that were turning public housing into welfare housing.

Listening to people in Elizabeth, I was able to blend in my own memories of the town in which I had grown up and gone to school, but which I had also left as soon as I could. I was a member of a fortunate group, a working-class generation born in the 1950s and early 1960s who benefited from all of the opportunities our parents could afford and were able to find a security unknown in our families' histories. We heeded our

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parents' warnings about the need for qualifications and safe jobs and we worked hard. For many of us it came at the cost of disconnection, though I don't think we realised that as we left Elizabeth or places like it in the 1970s.

Writing a book about Elizabeth was a way of telling an important story about the policies and promises that had given my generation our chances. I broached, if I could not resolve, my ambivalence about the emphasis on sacrifice, struggle and hard work, and about the ways of life that could and could not be imagined. I wanted to give a clearer picture of how and why a place like Elizabeth, which outsiders so often see as drably plebeian, could be so valued by the people who lived there. And in writing about the decisions that helped make Elizabeth poor I realised that there was much more to be said about places like it, and the other people who were living at the sharp end of Australia's reshaping.

I wanted to continue writing about people living in hard times, and to describe the world from their perspective. This took me beyond Elizabeth to those suburbs perceived as the most disadvantaged places in the larger eastern cities: Melbourne's Broadmeadows, on the flat lands of what used to be the city's north-western edge; Inala, one of the suburbs strung along the Cunningham Highway between Brisbane and Ipswich; and Mount Druitt, a Housing Commission suburb in Sydney's west.

For three years I asked people to tell me their stories. I started by talking with activists in neighbourhood houses or community centres, or with social workers in welfare agencies, and relied on them to suggest other people to whom I might talk. As they became convinced that I would listen carefully to what they had to say, they laced me into their networks and organised meetings with local residents. Other conversations were opportunistic, as neighbours and friends dropped by or people who were using the welfare centre decided that talking to me was an interesting enough diversion. Some thought of other people I might approach, and offered to go and get them. Because I wanted to listen to every possible point of view, I always asked people to nominate someone who might take a different perspective and maybe disagree with what they had said. In all, I talked with about 300 people.

I was interested in how people described their lives and their work, but I also wanted to know what they thought about the future and how they would change the world if they could. This wasn't a study of budgets and

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incomes or labour market policies. I didn't use questionnaires and surveys. Scholars more expert than I were already doing that. This was a study of people's stories, of what they wanted to say, what they could see happening, and what they hoped might yet happen.

At the time I did these interviews the recession of the early 1990s had not yet lifted: unemployment in these suburbs hovered at around 15–20 per cent, and local services were struggling to cope with dramatic increases in need. In some estates, fewer than one in ten families contained anyone earning a wage. Many people felt left behind, and that those who lived outside the area had stopped caring. Those who had managed to keep their jobs had unemployed sons and grandsons, daughters bringing up children on their own, friends and kin who were scared and didn't know what the future held.

I often heard about a world being destroyed, the world they had created in the 1960s and 1970s. I heard about the return of insecurity and poverty that many people thought had gone forever. Many people felt betrayed by the political party for which they had voted all their lives. They were tired of the stigma and unsure if the struggle was really leading anywhere. Among young people I heard of the pain of adulthood delayed by unemployment and parenting distorted by poverty. Among older people I heard fading hopes for a better world, for which they often blamed themselves. One woman from Inala insisted on telling me about her greatest failure: she hadn't taught her daughter how to be poor. She hadn't thought it would ever be needed. But, she said, Australia was changing. She shouldn't have trusted the good times, and she should have known the hard times would come back.

I heard the tragedies of youth suicide, and 40-year-old unemployed men who spoke quietly of how they had failed their families. A woman living on twenty spare dollars a week and eating every other day so her children could have milk; a woman heating the house every second night because she couldn't afford the bill and the newly privatised electricity company wouldn't cut her any more slack; the worker in an emergency relief service that had lost half its funding, who had to choose which person would wait two weeks for their emergency food parcel and who was so desperate they had to get food on the spot. It is what some people want to call 'relative poverty'. It is what some people would like to say doesn't exist in Australia. It shouldn't, but it does.

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Three places

At first I was just angry for the people who shared their stories with me. I was going to write an exposé about ‘hidden people’ and ‘Australia’s shame’. I would bear witness to the inadequacies of the welfare system and to what abstractions such as ‘downsizing’ actually meant in people’s lives. However, this wasn’t the tale they wanted told. Nor did it do justice to the complicated, careful stories they shared with me. I had to learn what had to be said, about hope as well as pain.

A more immediate problem was whether I could convey the great diversity of each of these suburbs. One of the facts that is sometimes ignored in accounts of disadvantaged places is the jumble of different paths and experiences they contain. Seemingly detached from the real city – although both Inala and Broadmeadows are within 15 kilometres of the central business district, and only Mount Druitt, located 35 kilometres from central Sydney, could really be called distant – their differences are submerged in an expectation of drab sameness. Those differences, within each street and estate, trace the intricate histories of individuals and families, as well as the impact of decisions taken by powerful people who don’t live there: how many public housing units are kept or sold, who moves in and who is relocated out, which factory is saved or closed.

In one street there might be several households dependent on old age or single parent pensions, others on unemployment relief, still others living on one or two low wages. Some are doing well enough, perhaps saving to buy a cheap house or a block of land, while others are redundant or retrenched. There are older couples who have purchased their homes and have a caravan, widows and widowers who live alone in public housing or are providing a home for unemployed grandchildren, families with eight children living next-door to lonely transients who close their blinds tightly against the street.

Each of these places also registers the mobility of twentieth-century people. When I was there in the middle of the 1990s almost everyone I saw had moved or been moved from somewhere else. Most of the Australian-born were displaced from inner suburbs, moved out to the city’s edge in search of cheaper housing, or moved in from country towns and lost farms. Inala and Mount Druitt had large and well-organised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, often tied through migration to

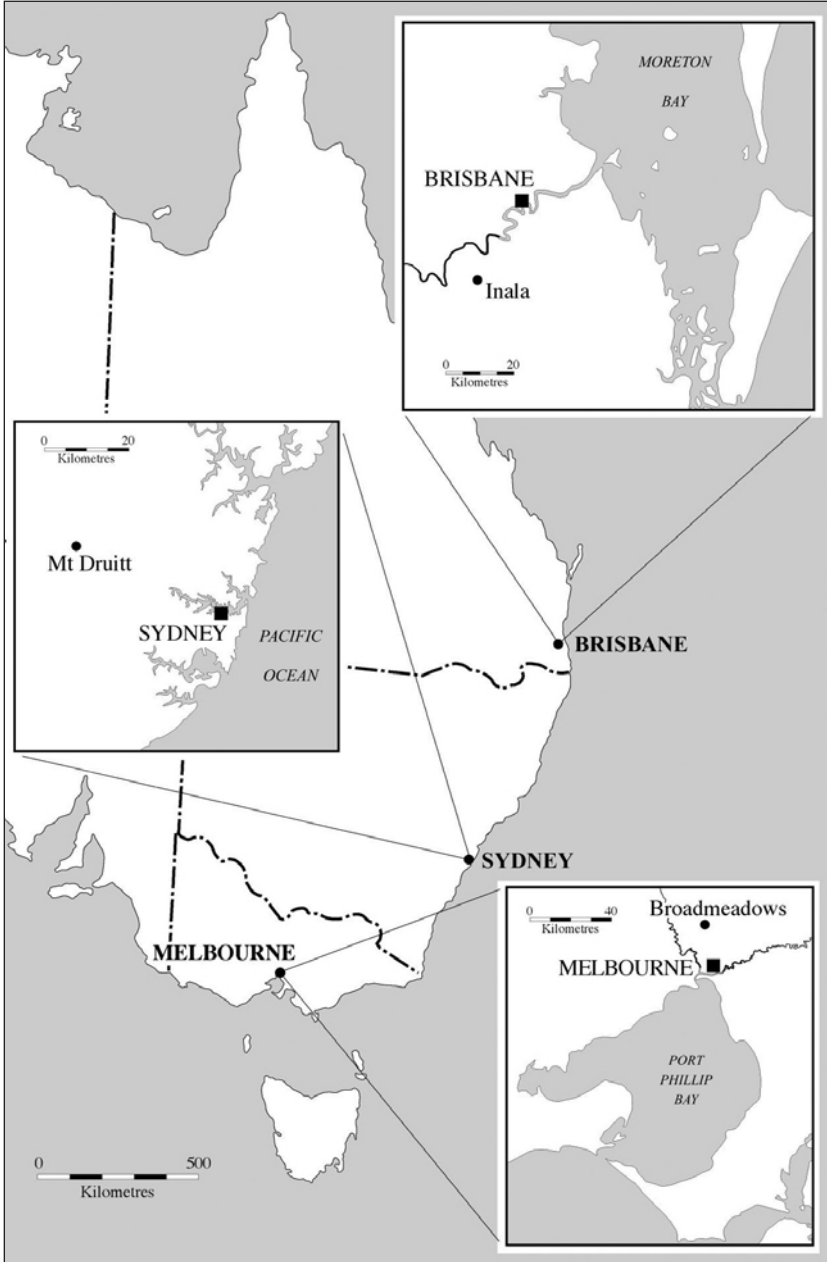


Figure 1: Inala, Mount Druitt and Broadmeadows

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former missions or inner suburbs, such as Sydney's Redfern. In all three, around one-third of the adults were born outside Australia, and most spoke a language other than English. Inala, Broadmeadows and Mount Druitt had all become increasingly diverse after 1980, as longer-established groups such as Italians, Greeks and Maltese were joined by Samoans, Tongans, Filipinos, Guatemalans, El Salvadoreans, Hmong, Turks, Vietnamese, Iraqis, Kurds and Eritreans.

It is important to stress variations within places that many outsiders see as drably similar. However, I still had to make decisions about emphasis and concentration. As I spent more time in each suburb I found myself drawn to the local residents who, in their own words, were doing it hard, and to the social workers, activists, priests, nuns and volunteers who ran the hardest pressed agencies. My focus became the experiences, the ideas, the fears and the hopes of people brought together not by a particular cultural identity but by their entrenched hardship. Some were migrants, some were Aboriginal, and some were Australian-born; some were living on very low incomes, some were working in public and private welfare agencies and some were doing both. But all said that what really mattered was poverty. If it didn't dissolve boundaries of culture, language, age and gender, hardship nonetheless provided people with a common register of complaint and of vision. Anne Neilsen, a Mount Druitt community worker, talked about focusing on the people who were 'easily put down' and 'easily swept aside'. I needed to incorporate her wisdom and to see that the people most likely to be discarded and ignored had not only endured the worst injustices but knew the most about justice.

Rather than writing about these three suburbs – an immensely difficult task given their diversity – I decided to write about the people living in those parts identified as particularly poor and those who worked in the nearby agencies. In Broadmeadows this meant the public housing estates of 'old' Broadmeadows and Dallas, as well as the newer estate at Meadow Heights. In Mount Druitt it was Bidwill and Shalvey, along with the cluster of welfare centres in Emerton. Inala is a smaller, more contained place, and while I began to grasp some of its internal divisions, these seemed less significant than in the other two suburbs.

I tried as best I could to speak to a wide range of people. About two-thirds of those to whom I spoke were women, because female residents and

female workers do most of the talking. While the majority were Anglo-Australian, about 10 per cent spoke another language as well as English and another 10 per cent were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Most of the residents lived in public housing and more than two-thirds were living on pensions or unemployment benefits. The employed formed the smallest group, and they were largely labourers, factory workers, cleaners or shop assistants.

Their paths into hardship were depressingly familiar. From their perspective the best definition of poverty was its persistent insecurity. Theirs was the poverty of always being behind, always being unable to afford things everyone else takes for granted, and always putting up with run-down housing and poor health. Their hardship had a history that could not be captured in snapshots. Other people's mishaps – too many bills coming at once, getting ill, losing a part-time job, having a child with asthma, a broken appliance – were their catastrophes. Pushed into poverty by accumulating misfortune, they did not have the resources to protect themselves from its consequences. If they envied rich people anything, it was their safe distance from disaster.

Most of the people with whom I spoke came from backgrounds of rural or inner-urban hardship. Their homes had too many children and not enough money. Some had lost a father or a mother or both, or one parent was a drinker, a gambler or a drifter. Their schooling had been poor. They didn't read and write very well and when they were at school the classes were too large and the teachers too busy to help them. Out in the world at the age of 14 or 15, with no qualifications, their work histories were punctuated by unemployment. They had always received low pay and those with families generally relied on one wage while their children were small. Those who were younger had entered the labour market in the 1970s and 1980s, when it was harder to find and keep decent jobs. As recession bit in the 1980s the middle-aged men and women were in the most vulnerable jobs, in the most insecure industries. Some had worked in one factory for two or three decades, but longevity and loyalty counted for little. Others worked as mailroom clerks, railway workers, labourers, train conductors, hospital porters or school cleaners, or for the power stations and water boards. As public organisations slashed their workforces in the 1990s they were the first to go.

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Some had expensive or chronic illnesses. Other people had to use their meagre savings to care for a sick mother or husband or wife. They had car accidents and were injured at work. Geraldine, Val and Michael had married gamblers; Joan had married a man who died young, leaving her with six children, no skills or experience with which to get a job and no money for childcare. Kylie, Alison and Sophie had unplanned pregnancies but decided to keep their babies. Vincent and Karen, looking back, said they had had one too many children, while Linda had triplets who quickly exhausted her husband's storeman income. Grace hadn't bargained on her fourth child, and it was a difficult pregnancy, but she was a Catholic so the few thousand dollars she'd saved for a deposit on a house were eaten up in hospital bills. Lorraine, Bill, Darren and Graeme had not done well in school: they'd had to stay home to look after a sick parent or younger children, or been dyslexic or deaf or disinterested. Jean, Jeff, Elena, Martin and Matt had lost their jobs because the company they worked for had gone broke, they'd been expendable, or they'd turned 18 and the boss didn't want to pay them an adult wage.

This is not intended to be a complete history of Mount Druitt, Inala or Broadmeadows, nor a painstaking reconstruction of a few people's lives. Instead, my aim is to present a polyphonic portrait of the most impoverished people and those who worked with them and knew them, based on the stories they wanted to tell about the world as it was in the 1990s and as it might be in the future. It is my contribution to a tradition of writing about people who are on the lowest rung. It shares the commitment that produced such powerful works as *Struggletown*, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* and *All Our Kin*, and the other compassionate accounts of hard times in Australia and elsewhere.¹ I acknowledge the concern of Lois Bryson and Ian Winter about a light of inquiry that is always shined on the powerless rather than the powerful.² But I knew that done well it could move hearts and change minds.

Some will not want to be moved or to change their minds. They will insist that people don't have to be poor and that they have brought it upon themselves. People will say the poor refuse to better themselves, that they are lazy and won't pull themselves up by their boot-straps; that they don't really want a job; that they always have cigarettes and beer and a colour television, perhaps these days even a mobile phone. They get

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themselves pregnant so they can get the single parent pension. They aren't stupid, they're clever and fraudulent and they tell lies.

If it is unearned, unfair and unlucky, poverty seems very cruel. So we reassure ourselves that poor people are to blame. Everyone seems to know someone who knows someone else who says that he knows a person who is rorting the system. The evidence can be flimsy – third- or fourth-hand, even fabricated – but it will still be held up as truthful. Invariably, people create a middle ground – ‘for some, it's through no fault of their own’ – and then sweep it away: ‘but you can't do anything for some people’. These beliefs must be true because the alternative is unpalatable. Perhaps poverty – and wealth – stem from a fundamentally unfair structure. Perhaps those who are privileged in terms of inheritance, opportunity and ability do very well and are protected against the consequences of their failures, while those who are not must struggle harder to succeed and suffer dire consequences should they fail. In other words, the distance between a rich person and a poor person measures the weight of a whole range of advantages, earned or unearned. If you wish to be wealthy or even just comfortable it is still good advice to choose your parents carefully.

In order to do justice we must reject the fantasy that poverty is deserved. Further, we must have regard for our common humanity. We must insist that if we were in the same situation we would be just as unsure about how to solve our problems. We might make the same mistakes or worse ones. Yet somehow poor people have never quite become part of a common humanity. Other people always want to push them out. There must be something wrong with poor people after all. They don't deserve any sympathy, let alone compassion. Thankfully, no one dares use the term ‘nigger’ any more. But loser? bludger? people who don't count? Some of our most respectable citizens seem happy enough to use those words. To treat poor people so harshly you have to see them as unlike you in a very fundamental way. But they are not unknowably distant. In them we should see ourselves if things had been different.

The debate about social division and poverty in Australia pays too little attention to the experiences and ideas of people like Geraldine, Val, Darren, Lorraine, Elena and Matt. Discussions of welfare reform or ways of tackling unemployment too often fail to address a broader problem: a problem in the way that people who are not poor think about those who are. I don't think most people lack compassion or regard for the sufferings of strangers.