Upside-down view of down under

Michael Davie and Bill Bryson get funny peculiar ideas about Australia

Anglo-Australian Attitudes
Michael Davie
Secker & Warburg £17.99, pp250

Down Under
Bill Bryson
Doubleday £16.99, pp319

Australia is topical at the moment, with the centenary of federation about to be celebrated, the Olympics soon to open in Sydney and an imminent official visit to Britain by John Howard, the Prime Minister. Both Australia's economy and its culture are buoyant and there is a sense of boom time.

It is not surprising that publishers are cashing in by producing a plethora of books on all aspects of Australian life and history. Anglo-Australian Attitudes by Michael Davie, a former Observer journalist, is a discursive set of essays on the history of the vexed relationship between Australians and what they are no longer allowed to think of as their mother country. Davie - conspicuously knowledgeable about the countries' common history - writes as an Englishman who prefers Australia and cannot understand why Australians cling to any British traditions.

Davie starts with the issue of class, claiming that it is a myth that Australia is classless. It had never crossed my mind that Australia might consider itself classless, since, like east coast America, it has preserved the institutions of birth, education and privilege rather more intact than Magdalen College, Oxford. He then has a chapter on attitudes to Gallipoli - clearly a formative moment in making Australians think badly of Britain since it was generally assumed that Churchill had sent large numbers of Australian troops needlessly to their deaths as cannon fodder. What emerges is another side to Gallipoli, a side carefully excised from official accounts in order not to offend Australian sensibilities.

A chapter on the role of the governor-general misses the point of the arguments surrounding the referendum over whether or not Australia should be a republic, which involved a recognition of the potential problem of a Prime Minister having no limits to his or her authority - an issue about which one might find British sympathisers.

At the book's heart are a pair of chapters on why it might be regarded as legitimate for Australians to think ill of Britain. The first was the scandal over the Australian test matches in 1933 when the captain, Douglas Jardine, insisted that his players adopted bodyline bowling which, if not illegal, was certainly regarded as profoundly unsporting. Jardine was assumed to be a typical Englishman - arrogant, hypocritical and pretending to be a good sportsman when actually he was not. In fact, he comes across as extremely unusual, a shit of the first order, of which presumably there are examples in Australia and Britain.

The second, mid-century event that confirmed Australians in their views of the perfidy of Albion was when Churchill failed to send effective help to Australia when it was faced by Japanese invasion. But as Davie effectively demonstrates, there was an element of self-delusion about the might of the British Empire if Australians thought that Britain would happily send off its fleet to the South Pacific when still faced by German invasion of its own shores.

Cumulatively, the book makes you wonder why anyone in Australia should be remotely sympathetic towards Britain. The reality, of course, is different from this one-sided book. For example, the current exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery of photographs by Polly Borland of Australians in Britain includes in the catalogue a wealth of information about why Australians were keen to leave Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. They regarded Britain as more liberal, more willing to countenance an avant-garde. This attitude of admiration for some of the better aspects of Britain cannot simply be dismissed as cultural cringe.

Bill Bryson has also written an account of his travels round Australia which borders on the parodic. Bryson has made, I presume, an immense amount of money writing an everyman's account of his travels. The formula is always the same, consisting of a little bit of background information conveyed in

the most casual way possible and then an anecdotal account of what went wrong. His first book in the genre, The Lost Continent, was deservedly successful. But as he writes more and more of these books on the basis of less and less travel, the humour wears thin.

The reality is that Bryson is now famous in his own right; when he goes to some godforsaken hole in the Australian outback, he is met by the chief of the local bureau of tourism. When he is attacked by jellyfish in the ocean at Manly, he is accompanied by a staff photographer from the Sydney Morning Herald .

You feel that, from the moment he gets out of bed in the morning to the moment he goes to sleep, he is hoping that something funny will happen. The result is deeply tedious.

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