

1c- Australia is an interesting place

Australia is, after all, mostly empty and a long way away. Its population, about 19 million, is small by world standards – and its place in the world economy is consequently peripheral; as an economic entity, it is about the same size as Illinois. From time to time it sends us useful things – opals, merino wool, Errol Flynn, the boomerang – but nothing we can't actually do without. Above all, Australia doesn't misbehave.

Australia is the world's sixth largest country and its largest island. It is the only island that is also a continent, and the only continent that is also a country. It was the first continent conquered from the sea, and the last. It is the only nation that began as a prison. It is the home of the largest living thing on earth, the Great Barrier Reef, and of the most famous and striking monolith, Ayers Rock (or Uluru to use its now official, more respectful Aboriginal name).

It has more things that will kill you than anywhere else. Of the world's ten most poisonous snakes, all are Australian. Five of its creatures – the funnel-web spider, box jellyfish, blue-ringed octopus, paralysis tick and stonefish – are the most lethal of their type in the world. This is a country where even the fluffiest of caterpillars can lay you out with a toxic nip, where seashells will not just sting you but actually sometimes go for you. Pick up an innocuous coneshell from a Queensland beach, as innocent tourists are all too wont to do, and you will discover that the little fellow inside is not just astoundingly swift and testy, but exceedingly venomous. If you are not stung or pronged to death in some unexpected manner, you may be fatally chomped by sharks or crocodiles, or carried helplessly out to sea by irresistible currents, or left to stagger to an unhappy death in the baking outback. It's a tough place.

And it is old. For 60 million years, since the formation of the Great Dividing Range, Australia has been all but silent geologically, which has allowed it to preserve many of the oldest things ever found on earth – the most ancient rocks and fossils, the earliest animal tracks and riverbeds, the first faint signs of life itself. At some undetermined point in the great immensity of its past – perhaps 45,000 years ago, perhaps 60,000, but certainly before there were modern humans in the Americas or Europe – it was quietly invaded by a deeply inscrutable people, the Aborigines, who have no clearly evident racial or linguistic kinship to their neighbours in the region, and whose presence in Australia can be explained only by positing that they invented and mastered ocean-going craft at least 30,000 years in advance of anyone else in order to undertake an exodus, then forgot or abandoned nearly all that they had learned and scarcely ever bothered with the open sea again. It is an accomplishment so singular and extraordinary, so uncomfortable with scrutiny, that most histories breeze over it in a paragraph or two, then move on to the second, more explicable invasion – the one that begins with the arrival of Captain James Cook and his doughty little ship HMS Endeavour in Botany Bay in 1770. Never mind that Captain Cook didn't discover Australia and that he wasn't even a captain at the time of his visit. For most people, including most Australians, this is where the story begins.

Eighty per cent of all that lives in Australia, plant and animal, exists nowhere else. More than this, it exists in an abundance that seems incompatible with the harshness of the environment. Australia is the driest, flattest, hottest, most desiccated, infertile and climatically aggressive of all the inhabited continents. (Only Antarctica is more hostile to life.) This is a place so inert that even the soil is, technically speaking, a fossil. And yet it teems with life in numbers uncounted. You take my point again, I'm sure. This is a country that is at once staggeringly empty and yet packed with stuff. Interesting stuff, ancient stuff, stuff not readily explained. Stuff yet to be found. Trust me, this is an interesting place.

Abridged from Bill Bryson, *Down Under*, chapter 1 , 2000