

[M E M O I R]

THE SHOALS OF CELEBRITY

WHEN SETTING UP THE AUSTRALIAN STUDIES CENTRE IN LONDON, HISTORIAN GEOFFREY BOLTON FOUND HIMSELF INVOLVED IN DELICATE DIPLOMATIC DEALINGS WITH A NUMBER OF FAMOUS FIGURES IN THE WORLDS OF ROYALTY, HIGH POLITICS AND ENTERTAINMENT. HE RECOUNTS THESE HERE.

TALLER than ever in morning suit and striped trousers, Malcolm Fraser received me in Parliament House to find out my plans for the new Australian Studies Centre at the University of London. 'I don't want it to be like Harvard,' he said. (The formal garb, it turned out, was not in my honour but because he was about to attend the swearing-in of Sir Ninian Stephen as governor-general.)

Harvard was one of two chairs of Australian studies created by the Whitlam government to enhance Australia's image in the world. The other was at University College Dublin, part of the dowry accompanying Vince Gair as ambassador to the Irish Republic. The Harvard chair in those years made little impact. Ignoring the claims of the University of Texas at Austin, Duke University, and even Yale—all of which had shown interest in some aspect of Australian studies—the Australian government endowed Harvard with a capital sum enabling a visiting professor to spend several months delivering a course on his or her speciality. It might be literature, it might be history, it might be politics or economics. There was no continuity and no infrastructure. It was not an ideal method of increasing American awareness of Australian culture and society. Hence Fraser's comment.

It was anomalous that there should have been no support of Australian studies in the United Kingdom, and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London perceived an opportunity. Founded in 1949 under the directorship of Sir Keith Hancock, the institute was under challenge in the mid-1970s to demonstrate its relevance and its capacity to attract funding. Its director, the deceptively mild-mannered Professor W.H. Morris-Jones, and his genially energetic offsider Peter Lyon, entered into negotiations with the Australian government. The 25th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's reign provided an occasion. By 1981 the decision was taken that the Australian government would fund a chair and a lectureship in Australian studies, both held on short-term contracts to enable healthy turnover, within the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. Unlike Harvard, funding would not come by way of irretrievable endowment but took the form of a recurrent grant.

Having been appointed in December 1981 to take up the position in September 1982, I had time to think through the priorities. These included the occupation of 28 Russell Square, one of a row of six Georgian houses in the University of London precinct. It had no previous Australian associations except that its first occupant was lord chief justice of England from 1818 to 1832 and sent many involuntary migrants to Van Diemen's Land and New South Wales. It was next door to the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. A generous grant from members of the Britain-Australia Society facilitated the integration of the two buildings and some elegant interior decoration. I told the prime minister that the Australian Studies Centre would become the port of call for Australian scholars visiting London, and that we hoped to attract not only academics but also creative writers and artists, perhaps even scientists. For a few of them we would be able to provide a desk and working space. We would conduct regular seminars, bringing in the Australian business community in London. We would also set up a visiting fellowship scheme so that academics at British universities who were showing a convincing intention of putting Australian content into their courses would be enabled to visit Australia for materials and contacts.

Before arriving in London I made a blunder over publicity. Interviewed by telephone by the *Australian*, I said that I wanted to show the British that there was more to Australia than the stereotypes identified with Rolf Harris and Barry Humphries. Both were offended, but their reactions were characteristically different. When I next encountered Rolf, whom I had known since student days, he abused me for about twenty seconds then burst into a big grin, slapped me on

the back, called me a silly old bugger, and it was all over. Later he gave me helpful advice about presenting my material to the public.

Humphries was not-so easily placated. Two months after my arrival he published in *Punch* a Les Patterson sketch in which Sir Les revealed his plans for the Australian Studies Centre with all the predictable kitsch. (He also endowed the Centre with a secretary in crotchless bikini pants, to the displeasure of the impeccably maidenly Irishwoman who was acting in that capacity at that time.) Humphries must have been pleased with his sketch, as he published it in *Quadrant* as well. Some of the Centre's wellwishers worried about damage to its image, but I ordered a hundred offprints from *Quadrant* and used them as publicity. I also thought it was time to be sensible and have lunch with Humphries, but our mutual friend Ross Fitzgerald reported that he was still very implacable. Months later Humphries paid the Centre an unscheduled visit, charmed the staff and left a signed copy of one of his books, but unfortunately I was away and missed him.

As a Western Australian provincial I was aware that the Centre should not confine itself to metropolitan London and travelled around visiting the established workers in the Australian field, such as Sean Glynn at the University of Kent and Peter Quartermaine at Exeter. There was also a flourishing if unlikely field of force at Lincoln Cathedral, where Canon Rex Davis was building on the local connexions of Matthew Flinders and Joseph Banks to build up an Australian centre. Scotland and the north of England showed the strongest promise for future developments. We were not yet ready to tackle Oxford and Cambridge, and it proved difficult to evoke interest at the Open University. All the same, we had ample materials for establishing the British Australian Studies Association in 1983; BASA was an acronym easily rendered as 'Bazza'. We also commissioned an experienced bibliographer, Valerie Bloomfield, to compile a bibliography of sources for Australian studies in the United Kingdom, and this was published in 1986. It may not have been as exciting as Sir Les Patterson's agenda, but we were laying solid foundations.

The Australian Studies Centre was to have its own committee of management, subordinate in theory to the Institute of Commonwealth Studies but in practice unimpeded. Sir Zelman Cowen, who had recently retired as governor-general to become provost of Oriel College, Oxford, agreed to take the chair. Whether because of his vice-regal experience or from innate tact, he was the perfect chairman of a board, insistent that he should be thoroughly briefed before meetings, offering the occasional piece of advice or comment, but firmly supportive of our activities and a helpful source of contacts. I was also fortunate in

recruiting staff. For the lectureship we chose John Warhurst, who had been lecturing in politics at the Warrnambool CAE. It is a minor irony, but in no way an inconsistency, that having helped in the creation of an Anglo-Australian centre for studies he is now leading the Australian Republican Movement. We had a welcome addition to our strength in Bob Lim, an Australian government economist. He brought us an expertise in Australian economics and trade beyond anything Warhurst or I could muster and helped us make good contacts with the Australian business community. He also enabled us to cut short any questions about the survival of the White Australia policy in our appointments.

In the course of my initial interview with Malcolm Fraser, I had mentioned the opening ceremony, scheduled for 9 June 1983. The University of London wanted it to be conducted by Princess Anne, who had recently become their chancellor. During visits to Australia she had not won altogether favourable publicity, and I thought we might do better with Prince Charles, who had been recently married and was known to enjoy Australia. It was very simple, replied Malcolm Fraser. He was Australia's prime minister and he would perform the ceremony himself. As a good nationalist I was pleased, but that was not the end of the story. I had been delighted to inform my colleagues at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies that Malcolm Fraser wanted to officiate, but they looked glum. It turned out that someone at the University of London had decided that, in order to avoid choosing between Charles and Anne, they should ask the Queen Mother to perform the ceremony. She had recently retired as chancellor of the university, her Australian credentials went back to the opening of Parliament House in 1927 and she was everyone's favourite grandmother. As we couldn't be sure if Malcolm Fraser would remember his decision we had to pussyfoot around the problem for several months until in early 1983 he unexpectedly called an election and was defeated. We made sure that his successor, Bob Hawke, received an invitation to the opening ceremony, but on the firm understanding that the Queen Mother would be centre-stage.

This was not my only foray into diplomacy. It had been decided that the guest list for the opening ceremony should include every available former prime minister of Britain and governor-general of Australia. Sir John Kerr was then living in Pall Mall in London and could hardly be ignored, but seven years after the dismissal of Whitlam he was still a controversial figure. As an unworldly academic who, if he blundered, would not embarrass anyone politically, I undertook to ask Sir John to lunch at the Royal Commonwealth Society. We had an agreeable lunch, with only one bottle of white wine between us. He seemed very understanding. He realised that feelings were still strong, though he hoped that

with the advent of a Labor government they might now subside, and he was willing to stay away from the opening ceremony but hoped that he might be asked to take part later in seminars and gradually come into the community at the Centre. But about a week before the opening ceremony I had an anguished communication from the Britain–Australia Society. Sir John Kerr, they said, was very displeased because he had not been asked. It was too late to do anything about it, and no great mischief resulted. I could only conclude that after our conversation Sir John had reflected further and changed his mind, or perhaps Lady Kerr had told him that he was too complaisant. I wondered if Gough Whitlam's experience had been similar.

By this time all was in readiness for the opening. The interior decoration supervised by John Bannenberg looked elegant. The institute's drunken porter, Mills, had been given leave for the appropriate time. Our seminar program was progressing well and we had two postgraduate students, as well as plans for a coursework seminar. Even the English weather, after a poor spring, was turning on a warm, benign summer and in Russell Square the London sunbathers were working their way from white to pink. Because Margaret Thatcher had decided to stage an election, the Australian Studies Centre opening would take second place only to the cricket on Bob Hawke's London itinerary.

And it all went well on the day. The Queen Mother, a short, erect, dignified figure, played her part well, and Bob Hawke was always at his best with old ladies. The British dignitaries enjoyed themselves. Lord Home asked me to explain preferential voting to him. Lord Wilson of Rievaulx (Harold Wilson as was) gossiped with devastating candour about the sexual escapades of some of his former colleagues. We provided afternoon tea as well as champagne, of which there was plenty left over after the grandees had departed, making for a relaxed evening.

Ahead lay many vicissitudes. Government funding would ebb and flow; the Sir Robert Menzies Foundation would come to the rescue and provide the Centre with an appropriate name, and eventually an Australian government endowment; the alliance with King's College and the development of teaching in Australian studies would lead to a time for contemplating a farewell to 28 Russell Square. It is deeply satisfying that in a treacherous climate for academic funding the Centre has survived and flourished. We did not waste our own time and our country's resources in laying the foundations.