

*The Other Literature of Australia*

*Posthumous First Publication*

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I have titled this essay “The Other Literature of Australia”. By this, I mean the writing by and about migrants in Australia as distinct from that which is more generally thought of as distinctively Australian, and that we have in recent years come to call multicultural.

To put the subject in context, I will begin by giving you some idea of the changes in Australia’s population and attitudes to migrants since the country’s settlement just over 200 years ago; I will go on to deal with the efforts of the country’s early writers to develop a distinctive Australian literature and the effects of this on migrant writing; I will refer to the recent more visible emergence of migrant writers; and I will elaborate a little on the theme of the migrant being in a sense an exile in Australia, a theme which I will illustrate by quoting from my own writing.

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Let me begin by saying that Australia has from its beginnings been a country open to immigration. Although it was originally settled by the English, its very first settler ships (which, as you will know, carried many deported convicts) already contained a mixture of other nationals - Spanish-speaking as well – followed, especially after gold was discovered in the 1850s by Scandinavians, Poles, Chinese, Frenchmen, Hungarians, Italians, Jews and others, some of whom (or their offspring) quickly made their names in exploration, botany, art and political life.

Having said that, it still remains true that the greatest number of immigrants came from the British Isles. It was therefore inevitable that the country always remained predominantly Anglo-Celtic in its tastes, values, allegiances and parliamentary processes. It was also from early on a very strongly democratic country which, in addition to welcoming migrants, overall offered them the same rights that they took for themselves. But in exchange for this tolerance, it did expect them to pay a price. Not a price measured in money. To me, the price was even greater; it was that they assimilate quickly into Australian society and leave their separate cultures and lifestyles back home.

One of the major reasons for this is given by Australian writer, Tom Shapcott.

Shapcott notes that the development of a clearly-defined torn Australian culture needed a strong and simplified vision of the country and the direction it was to follow. But such a simplification does not sit well with the subtlety or shadings that form the deeper stuff of literature and stem more from the inner reaches of the artist, from his personal experience, his observation of relationships and his feelings and beliefs. Australia's first writers confronted not only a new country some 12,000 miles from their English home with its large, smooth, green and undulating glades and pastures, but a much, much harsher terrain consisting of vast tracts of raw undeveloped scrub, dense mountain ranges, sunburnt inland desert and, except for coastal areas, a great arid dryness. Australia's new sons had to adapt – or, more correctly, to redefine – old English-based attitudes to this harsh environment where matters of survival and endurance had to be put ahead of anything else. For the writers, this meant that they had to forsake what had been familiar back home and create their own language, images, narrative, colouration and rhythms to master the land through literature, as the pioneers had to do with their hands, muscles and sweat. Through this shared experience, there emerged a common bond between the new arrivals right through the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century which came to be called mateship, alongside a rugged individual vigour and passionate egalitarianism reflected in much colonial writing.

Non-English-speaking migrants also faced parallel problems of cultural dislocation; but against a background so dominated by an ever-sharpening Australian ethos, where these settlers wrote, their writings remained either unpublished or locked in tiny ghettos. Given the circumstances, it could scarcely be otherwise.

Why?

Consider the ways that minority group migrants can accommodate to a new home.

They – an after them their children, the second-generation migrants in particular – are in a difficult situation. On arriving, they bring with them a culture expressed through their own language, festivals, family legend and memory, both individual and national. On coming into contact with a new and encircling milieu with correspondingly new and diverse ideas, attractions, lifestyles, expectations and ways of doing things, these migrants and their children come to a crossroads where they have effectively three main directions to follow: one, clinging exclusively to their family's traditional culture and letting little of the outside enter into their lives; two, shaking off altogether their own cultures and language by assimilating totally and invisibly into the mainstream; and, three, in some way reconciling their particular ethnic lifestyles and the wider Australian one outside, at the cost of diluting or compromising their own. In the early days, total isolation was not a sustainable option, and restricted almost exclusively to the Chinese and indigenous Aborigines. It was rather assimilation that was by far the prevailing response, this being the main explanation why there is relatively little of ethnic writing to be found in Australia until well into this century.

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I come here to the third direction that the migrant writer might follow.

Australia has changed remarkably. After World War II, it opened itself to a mass migration which brought some 31/2 million people from a multitude of nations, (including 15,000 from Spain), so that today some thirty to forty percent of Australia's 18 million inhabitants are first-generation immigrants or direct descendants of these.

Alongside this demographic change there has been another that has for the first time accepted the migrant vision of things and actively encouraged and responded to ethnic writing in a positive way. Because of this encouragement and their expanding

audience, migrant writers have tapped the many issues that arise when migrants meet host – for instance, the conflicts generated by living in two cultures, this leading to a necessary working out of what to preserve and what may be shed of one's inheritance, how far to go in adopting external ways, the representations of the host's reception of the migrant and the migrant's reaction to his adopted home, and alongside these, other issues such as uprootedness, homesickness, adaptation and literary stereotypes. These areas in recent multicultural writing are particularly rewarding to read. They are areas that I have myself explored in a number of my stories.

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The question that arises here is how these trends and attitudes – the assimilationist through to the more recent multicultural – have been reflected in Australian literature in relation to the migrant.

In connection with stereotyping and the assimilationist ideal, one of the best-known migrant characters in Australian literature is Nino Culotta in the novel *They're a Weird Mob* by John O'Grady. In contrast to the southern Italians whom he describes as small dark people with black hair having bad habits, Nino is Piedmontese, a northern Italian who is big and fair, has blue eyes and good habits. But as good as these northern Italians may be, they still cannot compete with the superior offerings of Australia, and he enters that superior society by marrying an Australian girl, and proudly discarding all contact with his own origins. With this Australian girl, he has a son, whom he also calls Nino and reflects on how fortunate little Nino is to have been born in Australia.

“Probably,” he says, “ he (Nino) will never learn to speak Italian. Probably I will forget it myself, and will have difficulty conversing with my parents when we go visit them.”

Rather than causing him concern or regret, he actually celebrates this loss of his Italian culture, and (as John O'Grady's voice) urges others to follow his example, as he writes:

“There are far too many New Australians in this country who still mentally living in their homeland, who mix with people of their own nationality, and even try to persuade Australians to adopt their customs and manners. Cut it out. There's no better way of life in the world than that in Australia.”

The situation has changed. As Tom Shapcott also wrote: “We are, in our culture, at a stage where a particular richness of... perception is occurring.” That richness is the outward expression of what has come to be called multiculturalism – my personal preference is for the term omniculturalism – that is, the bringing into a nation of all nationalities and cultures and the recognition of their separately unique contribution to Australian life and culture at large.

With this increasing recognition of the migrant as a person in his own right, he has in a sense been liberated. First, he is more free to write as he will, and is also more likely to be listened to and heard; and, second, though a number of migrant writers do express gladness and gratitude at living in Australia – after all, many have been refugees from war and oppression elsewhere – yet they are no longer as obliged as before to lose themselves in the country or to sing its praises. Migration is not without its physical, emotional and psychic difficulties – for instance, the uprooting from one place and

sinking of new roots in another, the gaps between idealised expectations and the encountered realities, and losing one's former home while not easily adapting to the new. It is scarcely surprising therefore that their writings express all these in their different ways and, wholly at the opposite end of stereotypic portrayals, they speak as individuals with complex physical, mental, emotional and spiritual baggage which cannot be neatly squeezed into a ready-made mould labelled "the migrant".

So we find, for example, Jewish Yiddish-language writers like Pinchas Goldhar and Herz Bergner, and others like David Martin, Judah Waten, Vasso Kalamaras, Maria Lewitt, Rosa Capiello, Dimitris Tsaloumas, Antigone Kefala, Lolo Houbein, Walter Adamson and myself among others, who have tried to individualise migrants as credible flesh-and-bone characters, whether Italian, Jewish, Greek, indigenous Aboriginal, and so on and portray them as more than ultimately simplistic and offensive assimilationist Nino Culotta type caricatures. Gone from the scene is Nino's supposedly effortless (too effortless) transition from foreigner to Australian; gone is the migrant's dream of easy fortunes and quick and easy social acceptance. Instead there is bitterness, alienation, homesickness and prejudice, there is emotional, social, psychological and spiritual dislocation, as also the search for identity, meaning and self-realisation in the adopted home.

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In a way allied to the notion of migration is that of exile, and I want here to end with one last and very specific matter, that of the migrant and the migrant writer as being in such a state. The experience of exile is a universally known one with roots extending as far back as Adam and Eve banished from the Garden of Eden for their supposed disobedience, and certainly a part of recent Spanish history as well. What prompts this particular connection – mentioned here so that it may make tie in with a more personal parallel you can draw on – is a book I came across recently titled: *Literature and Inner Exile: Authoritarian Spain, 1939-1975* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1980) by Paul Ilie of the University of Michigan.

While his specific theme is that of exile and Spanish literature during General Franco's rule, Professor Ilie begins with more a general discussion of the different sorts of exile people may experience.

Hence, we have *refugees or displaced people* who, especially in times of war, leave their country for their survival. One has only to look at the multi-million refugees generated across the globe this century alone – throughout World War II, and from Vietnam, Cambodia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Angola – to appreciate the enormousness of the flight of people from their home. These people may, through fleeing, forfeit their nationality and become stateless persons. Settling into their new haven home, they may proceed either to hold to their imported traditions or assimilate into the new surrounds. (For some time after the war, my own parents who were from Poland and I who was born in Russia were such stateless persons living in a Displaced Persons' camp in Germany until we found a country that would accept us).

Then we have the *emigres* who are compelled to leave their country for fear of persecution, but who nonetheless hope to return when circumstances allow. Spain during the Franco era had a considerable number of writers and artists as well as political dissidents who went to other countries to wait until the time was ripe for their return.

Further, to distinguish from these external exiles – those who physically leave their country – Professor Ilie refers also to internal exiles, those who remain but are either sent to another part of the country (for example, Russian dissidents to Siberia), or dissidents kept under house arrest, and still others whose exile is located within themselves, those

who seem to function like everyone else around them, but feel distant from, and are unable to identify with the surrounding political, social and cultural expressions of mainstream life.

What I am here talking about is a closely allied state – and that is profound alienation.

But all forms of exile –whether external or internal – carry with them various degrees of alienation from one's customary home. External exiles, for instance, whether refugees, stateless persons, emigres or voluntary migrants, are inevitably affected by the people and the cultures of the countries of destination, which may lead them in turn to acquire new ways of seeing, thinking, believing and behaving. Meanwhile, in their absence, their home country may itself undergo considerable change. The end result is that, should they return, they may no longer feel they belong there. They are alien in their own land, something I have personally seen over and over among my Italian and Greek patients who after many years in Australia visit Italy or Greece and return to Australia, saying that they are glad they went but could never again live in their place of birth.

The point of all this is that much of Australian migrant writing is in a sense done by exiles, whether migrants by necessity or by choice. In fact, they are double, even triple exiles: they are both exiles from their native home and exiles in their chose one, in addition to which they carry with them that inner sense of exile I mentioned, an emotional and spiritual uprootedness and alienation even as they have to get on with living as best they can day by day – for their own sakes, for their children, and because most of them have no other choice.

This is where I would like you to read from my own work, a story titled “Home” which is complementary to “Two Years in Exile”, both of which are part of my first collection of stories *On Firmer Shores*. While you read the story keep in mind the forms of exile I cited above: my parents' (particularly my mother's) physical exile from her Polish home; their emotional exile or marginality in the country to which they had come; and their inner spiritual exile or alienation brought about by living in a still underdeveloped suburb called Northcote, a “wilderness” as my mother called it, several miles from where the greater numbers of their fellow Jews in Melbourne lived at the time. People everywhere like to live in a place they can call “home”. For my part, as a boy of eight, I accommodated well enough; home, for me, was where the feet ran most freely. But my parent's feet did not run truly freely anywhere. Therefore, in their exile, where could they still find some semblance of home? My mother, as she appears in this story, found it, but it was not one that could give her – or anyone in her position – great comfort.

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With this, before you begin to read the story “Home”, let me just clarify a few terms:

The Bight is the Great Australian Bight, the last stretch of sea before reaching Melbourne.

Princes Pier refers to the port of landing in Melbourne.

The Vistula is the river dividing Warsaw in two, with the city's main centre on one side, and Praga on the other, with the Poniatowski Bridge connecting the two.

Sliska, Leszno and Stawka are the names of streets in Warsaw.

Ziegenhain was the DP camp in Germany where we lived for a time after the war.

Tashkent was the place in Russia to which my parents were exiled during the war, near to where I was born.

*In der heym* is the Yiddish for “back home” – that is, one's original home.

Chassidism is a devout Jewish religious ideology.  
Bundism was an East European Jewish socialist ideology.



Serge Liberman and Anna Mow in July 2017 (Courtesy Alex Skovron)