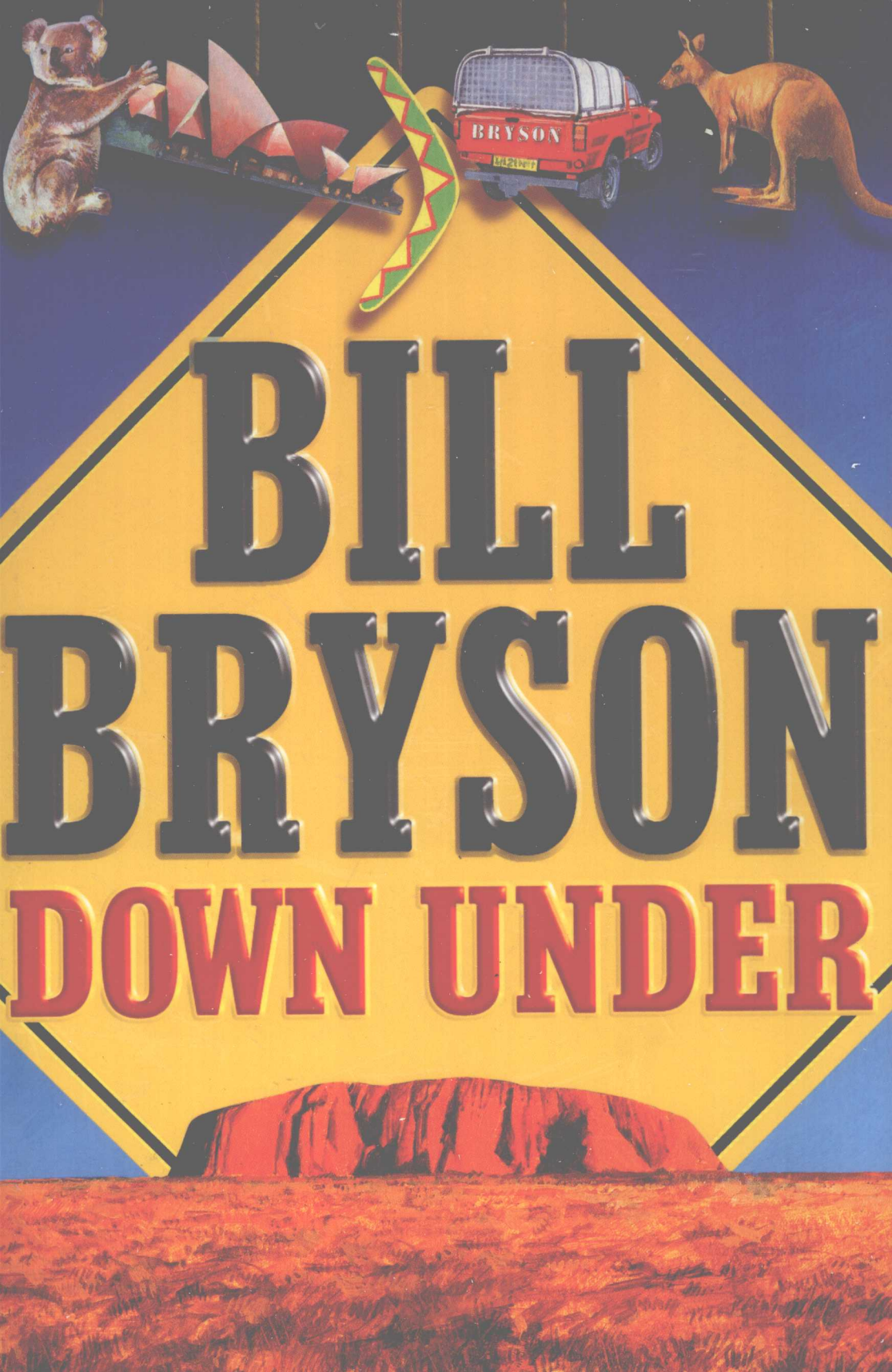


BILL BRYSON

DOWN UNDER

DOWN UNDER

BILL BRYSON

Doubleday

LONDON · NEW YORK · TORONTO · SYDNEY · AUCKLAND

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
a division of The Random House Group Ltd

RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA (PTY) LTD
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney
New South Wales 2061, Australia

RANDOM HOUSE NEW ZEALAND LTD
18 Poland Road, Glenfield, Auckland 10, New Zealand

RANDOM HOUSE SOUTH AFRICA (PTY) LTD
Endulini, 5a Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193, South Africa

Published 2000 by Doubleday
a division of Transworld Publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
ISBN 0385 40817X

Typeset in 11/13½pt Sabon by Falcon Oast Graphic Art

Printed in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

DOWN UNDER

Also by Bill Bryson

THE LOST CONTINENT

MOTHER TONGUE

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

MADE IN AMERICA

NOTES FROM A SMALL ISLAND

A WALK IN THE WOODS

NOTES FROM A BIG COUNTRY

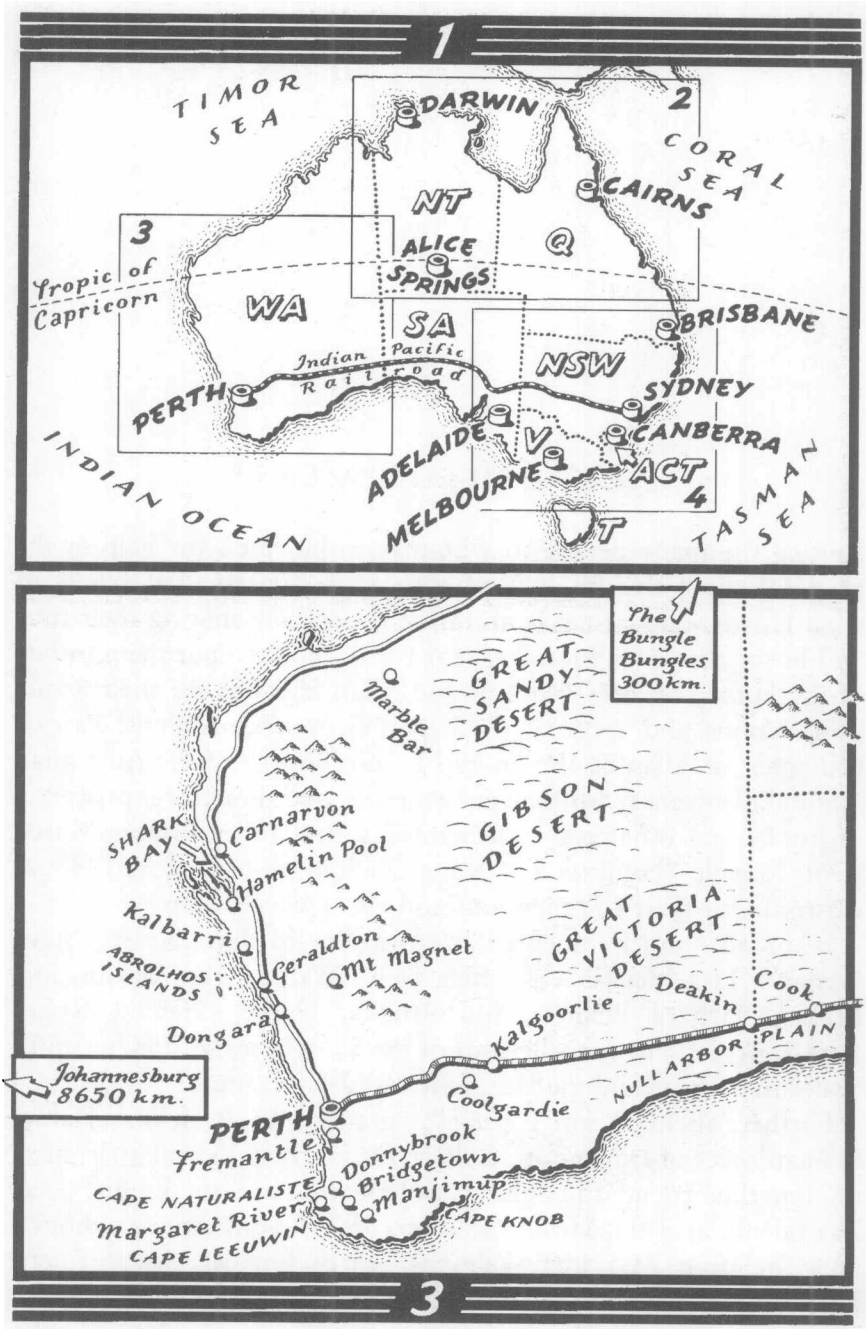
To David, Felicity, Catherine and Sam

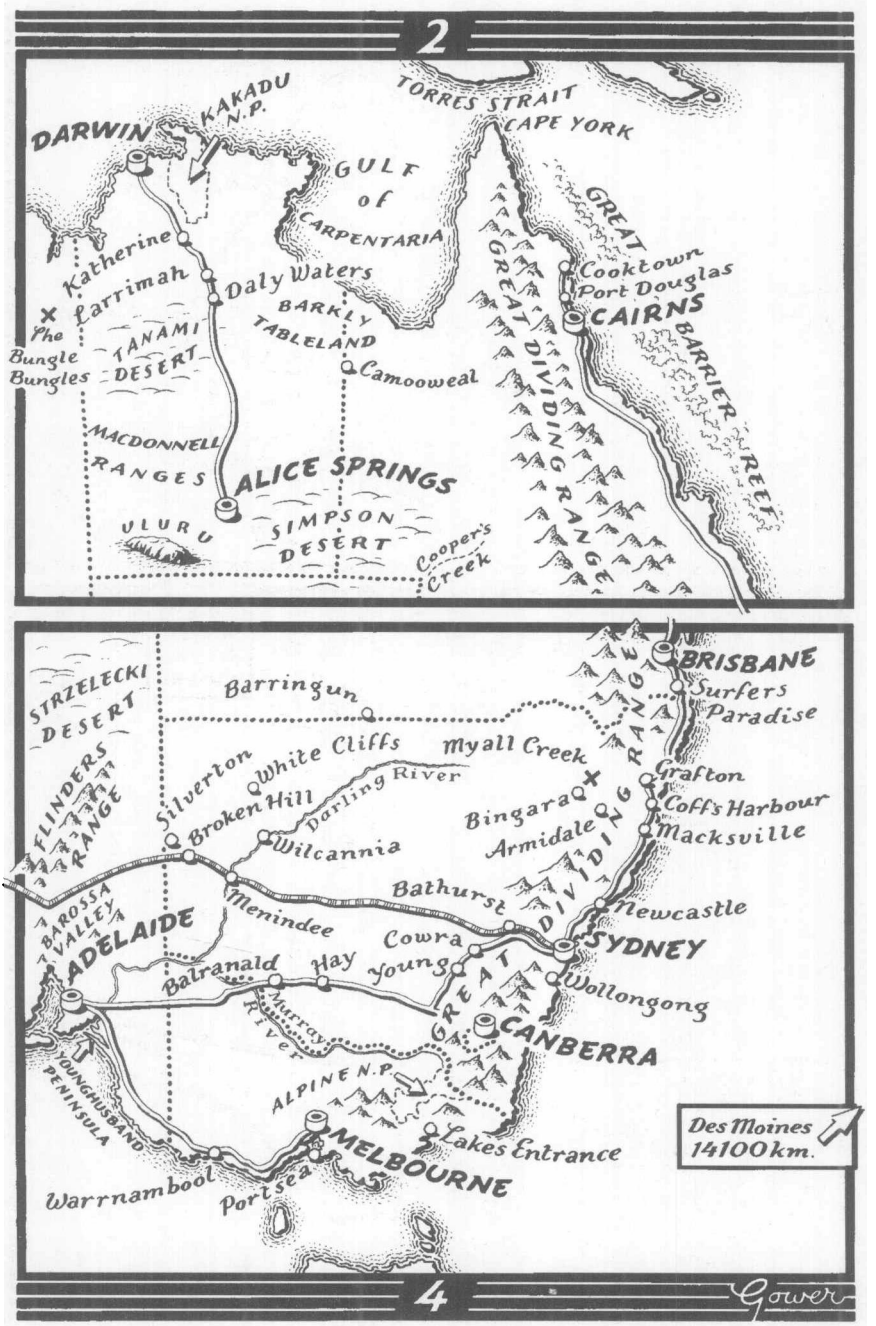
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Among the many people to whom I am indebted for help in the preparation of this book, I wish to express particular thanks to Alan Howe and Carmel Egan for so generously sharing their time and hospitality even knowing that I was about to put them in one of my books; Deirdre Macken and Allan Sherwin for their astute observations and sporting participation in what follows; Patrick Gallagher of Allen & Unwin and Louise Bourke of the Australian National University for the very generous and thoughtful provision of books and other research materials; and Juliet Rogers, Karen Reid, Maggie Hamilton and Katie Stackhouse of Random House Australia for their conscientious and ever-cheerful help.

I am also much indebted in Australia to Jim Barrett, Steve Garland, Lisa Menke, Val Schier, Denis Walls, Stella Martin, Joel Becker, Barbara Bennett, Jim Brooks, Harvey Henley, Roger Johnstone, Ian Nowak, the staff of the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney, and the late, dear Catherine Veitch.

Further afield, I am especially grateful to Professor Danny Blanchflower of Dartmouth College for much statistical assistance; my longtime friend and agent Carol Heaton; and the kindly, peerless talents at Transworld Publishers in London, among whom I must mention Marianne Velmans, Larry Finlay, Alison Tulett, Emma Dowson, Meg Cairns and Patrick Janson-Smith, who remains the best friend and mentor any writer could ask for. Above all, and as always, my profoundest thanks to my dear, patient, incomparable wife, Cynthia.


1
TIMOR SEA
DARWIN
2
CORAL SEA
CAIRNS
NT
ALICE SPRINGS
Q
3
Tropic of Capricorn
WA
SA
BRISBANE
Indian Pacific Railroad
NSW
PERTH
SYDNEY
CANBERRA
ADELAIDE
V
ACT
4
INDIAN OCEAN
MELBOURNE
T
TASMAN SEA
The Bungle Bungles 300km.
Marble Bar
GREAT SANDY DESERT
SHARK BAY
Carnarvon
GIBSON DESERT
Hamelin Pool
Kalbarri
Geraldton
Mt Magnet
GREAT VICTORIA DESERT
ABROLHOS ISLANDS
Deakin
Cook
Kalgoorlie
Dongara
NULLARBOR PLAIN
Johannesburg 8650 km.
Coolgardie
PERTH
Fremantle
Donnybrook
Bridgetown
CAPE NATURALISTE
Manjimup
Margaret River
CAPE KNOB
CAPE LEEUWIN
3


2
DARWIN
KAKADU N.P.
TORRES STRAIT
CAPE YORK
GULF of CARPENTARIA
GREAT DIVIDING RANGE
Katherine
Larrimah
Daly Waters
BARKLY TABLELAND
Cooktown
Port Douglas
CAIRNS
BARRIER REEF
The Bungle Bungles
TANAMI DESERT
Camooweal
MACDONNELL RANGES
ALICE SPRINGS
ULURU
SIMPSON DESERT
Cooper's Creek
STRZELECKI DESERT
Barringun
BRISBANE
Surfers Paradise
FLINDERS RANGE
Silverton
White Cliffs
Myall Creek
Broken Hill
Darling River
Grafton
Bingara
Coff's Harbour
Armidale
Macksville
Wilcannia
Bathurst
Newcastle
BAROSSA VALLEY
ADELAIDE
Menindee
Cowra
SYDNEY
Balranald
Hay
Young
Wollongong
Murray River
CANBERRA
YOUNGHUSBAND PENINSULA
ALPINE N.P.
Lakes Entrance
MELBOURNE
Warrnambool
Portsea
Des Moines 14100km.
4
Gower

DOWN UNDER

Part One

INTO THE OUTBACK

I

FLYING INTO AUSTRALIA, I REALIZED WITH A SIGH THAT I HAD forgotten again who their Prime Minister is. I am forever doing this with the Australian PM – committing the name to memory, forgetting it (generally more or less instantly), then feeling terribly guilty. My thinking is that there ought to be one person outside Australia who knows.

But then Australia is such a difficult country to keep track of. On my first visit, some years ago, I passed the time on the long flight from London reading a history of Australian politics in the twentieth century, wherein I encountered the startling fact that in 1967 the Prime Minister, Harold Holt, was strolling along a beach in Victoria when he plunged into the surf and vanished. No trace of the poor man was ever seen again. This seemed doubly astounding to me – first that Australia could just *lose* a Prime Minister (I mean, come on) and second that news of this had never reached me.

The fact is, of course, we pay shamefully scant attention to our dear cousins Down Under – though not entirely without reason, I suppose. Australia is, after all, mostly empty and a long way away. Its population, about 19 million, is small by world standards – China grows by a larger amount each year – 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. It is stable and peaceful and good. It doesn't have coups, recklessly overfish, arm disagreeable despots, grow coca in provocative quantities or throw its weight around in a brash and unseemly manner.

But even allowing for all this, our neglect of Australian affairs is curious. As you might expect, this is particularly noticeable when you are resident in America. Just before I set off on this trip I went to my local library in New Hampshire and looked up Australia in the *New York Times Index* to see how much it had engaged attention in my own country in recent years. I began with the 1997 volume for no other reason than that it was open on the table. In that year, across the full range of possible interests – politics, sport, travel, the coming Olympics in Sydney, food and wine, the arts, obituaries and so on – the *New York Times* ran 20 articles that were predominantly on or about Australian affairs. In the same period, for purposes of comparison, it found space for 120 articles on Peru, 150 or so on Albania and a similar number on Cambodia, more than 300 on each of the Koreas, and well over 500 on Israel. As a place that attracted American interest Australia ranked about level with Belarus and Burundi. Among the general subjects that outstripped it were balloons and balloonists, the Church of Scientology, dogs (though not dog sledding), and Pamela Harriman, the former ambassador and socialite who died in February 1997, a calamity that evidently required recording twenty-two times in the *Times*. Put in the crudest terms, Australia was slightly more important to Americans in 1997 than bananas, but not nearly as important as ice cream.

As it turns out, 1997 was actually quite a good year for Australian news in the United States. In 1996 the country was the subject of just nine news reports and in 1998 a mere six. Elsewhere

in the world the news coverage may be more attentive, but with the difference, of course, that no one actually reads it. (Hands up, all those who can name the current Australian Prime Minister or say in which state you will find Melbourne or answer pretty much any antipodean question at all not involving cricket, rugby, Mel Gibson or *Neighbours*.) Australians can't bear it that the outside world pays so little attention to them, and I don't blame them. This is a country where interesting things happen, and all the time.

Consider just one of those stories that did make it into the *New York Times* in 1997, though buried away in the odd-sock drawer of Section C. In January of that year, according to a report written in America by a *Times* reporter, scientists were seriously investigating the possibility that a mysterious seismic disturbance in the remote Australian outback almost four years earlier had been a nuclear explosion set off by members of the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo.

It happens that at 11.03 p.m. local time on the night of 28 May 1993 seismograph needles all over the Pacific region twitched and scribbled in response to a very large-scale disturbance near a place called Banjawarn Station in the Great Victoria Desert of Western Australia. Some long-distance lorry drivers and prospectors, virtually the only people out in that lonely expanse, reported seeing a sudden flash in the sky and hearing or feeling the boom of a mighty but far-off explosion. One reported that a can of beer had danced off the table in his tent.

The problem was that there was no obvious explanation. The seismograph traces didn't fit the profile for an earthquake or mining explosion, and anyway the blast was 170 times more powerful than the most powerful mining explosion ever recorded in Western Australia. The shock was consistent with a large meteorite strike, but the impact would have blown a crater hundreds of feet in circumference, and no such crater could be found. The upshot is that scientists puzzled over the incident for a day or two, then filed it away as an unexplained curiosity – the sort of thing that presumably happens from time to time.

Then in 1995 Aum Shinrikyo gained sudden notoriety when it released extravagant quantities of the nerve gas sarin into the Tokyo underground, killing twelve people. In the investigations

that followed, it emerged that Aum's substantial holdings included a 500,000-acre desert property in Western Australia very near the site of the mystery event. There, authorities found a laboratory of unusual sophistication and focus, and evidence that cult members had been mining uranium. It separately emerged that Aum had recruited into its ranks two nuclear engineers from the former Soviet Union. The group's avowed aim was the destruction of the world, and it appears that the event in the desert may have been a dry run for blowing up Tokyo.

You take my point, of course. This is a country that loses a Prime Minister and that is so vast and empty that a band of amateur enthusiasts could conceivably set off the world's first non-governmental atomic bomb on its mainland and almost four years would pass before anyone noticed. Clearly this is a place worth getting to know.

And so, because we know so little about it, perhaps a few facts would be in order.

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.

The world those first Englishmen found was famously inverted – its seasons back to front, its constellations upside down – and unlike anything any of them had seen before, even in the near latitudes of the Pacific. Its creatures seemed to have evolved as if they had misread the manual. The most characteristic of them didn't run or lope or canter, but *bounced* across the landscape, like dropped balls. The continent teemed with unlikely life. It contained a fish that could climb trees; a fox that flew (it was actually a very large bat); crustaceans so big that a grown man could climb inside their shells.

In short, there was no place in the world like it. There still isn't. 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