



VINTAGE

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# A SECRET COUNTRY

JOHN PILGER

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## About the Book

Expatriate journalist and film-maker John Pilger writes about his homeland with life-long affection and a passionately critical eye. In this fully updated edition of *A Secret Country*, he pays tribute to a little known Australia and tells a story of high political drama.

## About the Author

John Pilger grew up in Sydney, Australia. He has been a war correspondent, author and film-maker. He has twice won British journalism's highest award, that of Journalist of the Year, for his work all over the world, notably in Vietnam and Cambodia. Among a number of other awards, he has been International Reporter of the Year and winner of the United Nations Association Media Peace Prize. For his broadcasting, he has won France's Reporter sans Frontières, an American television Academy Award, an 'Emmy', and the Richard Dimbleby Award, given by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. He lives in London.



ALSO BY JOHN PILGER

*The Last Day*

*Aftermath: The Struggle of Cambodia and Vietnam* (with  
Anthony Barnett)

*The Outsiders* (with Michael Coren)

*Heroes*

*Distant Voices*

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*To the memory of my great-great grandparents, Francis  
McCarthy and Mary Palmer, who came to Australia in  
chains, and to the Aboriginal people who fought back.*

# A Secret Country

John Pilger



## INTRODUCTION

AS A YOUNG reporter on the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, assigned to cover the wharves and the airport, I was obliged to ask 'visiting celebrities' what they thought of Australia. Although they might have seen only those unique Australian officials who spray arriving passengers with disinfectant, they were expected to play a game and make a statement affirming all that was good and sublime about 'Godzone'. Exhausted by a seemingly endless journey, and broiling or shivering in the corrugated iron sheds that stood at the nation's gates, they were prompted about the delights of 'our beer, beaches and way of life'. Compliance ensured them generous space in the next day's papers; resistance risked public opprobrium. When the actress Elizabeth Taylor loudly and accurately described the question as 'dumb as shit', the size of the bags under her eyes was reported and it was noted that her latest husband was 'dwarf-like and grizzled'.

At other times the question would be welcomed, as in the case of Henry Wiley Fancher, a wealthy Texas rancher. Arriving to do business with the Premier of the State of Queensland, Sir Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, Fancher described Australia as 'truly wunnerful' because he liked 'a nigra in a nigra's place' and in Australia his son would not be 'seduced by coloured girls'. When told there were Aborigines in Queensland, he said, 'I've heard you treat them like our injuns. You've put them on reservations and they're no problem. Is that so?' It was so.

The game was not confined to the rich and famous. When a newly arrived Turkish immigrant was asked what he thought of Australia, his response was, 'Where the hell am

I?' 'He wants to know', said an interpreter, 'why it took so long to get to Austria.' According to one version of this story, the Turkish Government, anxious to be rid of large numbers of unemployed and politically troublesome young men, blurred the distinction between prospects for 'guest work' in Austria and Australia. Like so many others who have come to Australia by accident, against their will or seeking refuge, the Turk chose to stay. Perhaps a society which began with no grand design, except as a 'living hell' for those sent to it in 'penal servitude', whose expectations are entirely those of ordinary people and which has developed, by default, a cultural diversity greater than almost anywhere else, has an abiding strength denied to others, even if this at times is expressed as insecurity.

I have long regarded my own country as secret, as a land half-won, its story half-told. It was as if the past was another country, mysterious and unexplained. 'Australian history' either was not taught or was not required for 'higher learning'. Contemporary history was unheard of. Black history was ridiculed. Historians and politicians, more concerned with imperial propriety than truth, covered up and distorted. Wars were fought against invading British armies, whole Aboriginal nations were wiped out and their land stolen, but no mention was made of them. The evidence was available; but as Henry Reynolds, one of the leading new-wave historians, has pointed out, 'Black cries of anger and anguish were out of place in works that celebrated national achievement or catalogued peaceful progress in a quiet continent . . .' In *The Fatal Shore* Robert Hughes described 'a national pact of silence'; and although there have since been many changes, the ideology of the 'pact' and of its stereotypes remains.

During the 1988 'celebration' of the two-hundredth anniversary of Britain's bloody dispossession of the Aboriginal people, the Australian Government and advertising industry strove to conjure a nation of white

Anglo-Saxon Crocodile Dundees with the wit of the cast of *Neighbours*. One highlight of this endeavour was the spectacle of a number of fashionably dressed white people leaping up and down in front of the Aboriginal sacred site at Ayers Rock, singing 'Celebration of a Nation'. But such illusions failed to disturb a nightmare and its secrets. 'In the past', wrote Woli Saunders, an Aborigine, 'we died from ball and shot, poisoned flour, strychnined water-holes and smallpox. Today we are still dying. When will it stop?' Black Australians have died in police and prison cells on average every fourteen days, a rate higher than that of the death of black people in South Africa.

*A Secret Country* follows my book *Heroes* and a trilogy of documentary films, *The Last Dream*, which I made with Alan Lowery, Alec Morgan and others and were shown in a number of countries in the Bicentenary year. With the films as a starting point, I wrote this book so that it might be read dispassionately in the wake of the 1988 'celebrations'. It is not in any way definitive, but it is written in the belief - shared, I know, with many Australians - that our country deserves not old bromides and stereotypes, but the respect of critical appraisal and access to the widest range of views on its progress thus far.

At the beginning of their remarkable work, *A People's History of Australia*, Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee explain that their aim was 'not merely to compensate for past neglect, but to assert that we can only understand Australia's history by analysing the lives of the oppressed'. That has been my guide, too. A nation founded on the bloodshed and suffering of others eventually must make its peace with that one historical truth. Otherwise the best of what has been achieved is undermined and, as many Australians now say, 'something is missing'.

This book is not just about Australia. What is happening today in Australia is no more than a warning that liberal societies are being returned to passivity, obedience and

secrecy and that the subjugation of people's minds and pockets has a new set of managers and a new vocabulary. [Chapter 6](#), 'Mates', is about this new world of the 'transnational economy' and 'rational economics', of which Australia is a microcosm. With its banks and much of its industry de-regulated and its currency 'floated', Australia is now compelled to sell off its resources and rely on tourism and the vagaries of the international money markets. The result is a Two-Thirds Society, a model for the deepening recession of the 1990s, with a majority embracing the 'good life' by getting deeper into debt and a large minority excluded and effectively disenfranchised. In 1992 unemployment in Australia stood at more than ten per cent, the highest since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

One of our distinctions as Australians was that, unlike Britons with their walls of class and Americans with their vast disparities of wealth, we had struck a fine balance between the needs of the community and the individual. We measured social progress, it was said, not so much in terms of productivity and 'consumption' as by the well-being of the producers - all the producers, especially the providers of labour. In 1920 the silver and zinc miners of Broken Hill won the world's first 35-hour week, half a century ahead of Europe and the United States. Long before most of the world, Australia had a minimum wage, child benefits, pensions and the vote for women. The secret ballot was invented in Australia. By the 1960s we Australians could boast that we had the most equitable spread of personal income in the world. Twenty years later this has been lost in the most spectacular redistribution of wealth since the Second World War.

The new world economics order is represented in Australia by the Order of Mates, an arrangement of mutual benefit between leading politicians, notably of the Australian Labor Party, and their very rich and powerful patrons. This has spawned thousands of freshly minted millionaires, their

fortunes built on easy borrowing, property deals, tax avoidance and, for some, Government contracts and laws tailored for them and laws set aside for them. Today this new breed of Australian 'entrepreneur' has a place in the 'free market' parthenon, remembered for their spectacular successes and spectacular failures. For most of the 1980s Alan Bond, a principal Mate, was almost everywhere, selling XXXX beer in Britain and mining gold in Chile. Bondy, whose worldwide empire has now collapsed, at one time had a debt that accounted for as much as 10 per cent of the Australian national debt. Along with other Mates, he is, at the time of writing, awaiting trial.

The new order has meant poverty and homelessness on a scale unknown for two generations. The Minister for Social Security in the Hawke Government has warned of a new Australian poor 'living in massive deprivation . . . like perhaps we've never seen . . . a time bomb'. On sublime Bondi Beach bonfires are lit for thousands of homeless children. In the letters columns of the *Sydney Morning Herald* a 17-year-old boy writes a lament for his friends who have died. Australia now can claim one of the highest suicide rates of teenage males in the world.

Futurists seeking an example of the 'global village' need look no further than Australia. Nowhere else has the 'communications revolution' had such a profound effect. 'If you're not big, you'll be swept aside,' pronounced the New York media analyst Ed Atorino, whose dictum applies precisely to recent, dramatic changes in the Australian media. With Government support, a few Mates have controlled most of the information Australians watch and read. One Mate, Rupert Murdoch, controls almost two-thirds of all newspaper circulation, as well as the means of distribution. In one city, Adelaide, he owns the only morning paper, the only Sunday paper, all the local papers and all the printing presses. The Brave New World imagined by Aldous Huxley has clear echoes in these developments in

the pleasant, vulnerable land of Rupert, Bondy and the Silver Bodgie, where the illusion of 'saturation media' masks censorship by omission and a growing intolerance to rival ideas. The essence of this 'new democracy' is an old idea; it was described by Edward Bernays, the leading figure in 1920s American corporate propaganda, as the 'engineering of consent'. I hope *A Secret Country* will help to alert those whom this 'new democracy' betrays.

Above all, I have written this book with affection. As one who has lived and reported from many countries, I am constantly drawn back to the friendship, warmth and diamond light of my homeland. In one sense, to be an Australian is to be an outsider. My Irish great-great grandparents, who arrived in leg irons, were certainly outsiders. The millions of people who have come from all over the world - the 'displaced persons' from post-war Germany, 'Ten Pound Poms', confused Turks, Vietnamese 'boat people' - have come as true outsiders. And like all of us they will remain outsiders until nationhood is restored to the first Australians.

The American dissident Gore Vidal was once asked whether he still felt wholly American, spending most of his time in Europe as that other great American writer, Henry James, had done. He replied, 'Henry James did not really like the United States. I do. James was deeply ashamed of his native land. I am certainly not ashamed of it, just appalled by what our rulers do. James wanted to be a European. I don't . . . I feel more and more American as the years pass.' Change 'American' to 'Australian' and his sentiments are mine.

Having said that, I declare a loyalty to another country once described eloquently by the great English internationalist Bruce Kent. 'I have seen it', he wrote, 'while flying over the long red deserts of Australia, in the lakes and forests of northern Canada and in the night stars of Africa. I have known it in the tens of thousands of decent, caring,



suffering, unpublicised people worldwide who struggle in their different ways toward a new kind of world community into which the old nationalisms do not fit. The framework for that new unity and the terms of our trusteeship we have yet to understand. But there is a new country . . .'

Many Australians already belong to this new country. This book is a salute to them.

John Pilger  
March 1992

# 1

## ON THE BEACH

*After grey, wintry London Australia's colour and light intoxicated . . . We flew for hours over Martian landscapes, reached the cobalt ocean and were stunned by Sydney's brilliance. As thirsty men cannot help but gulp, so pale arrivals from the northern hemisphere revel and gorge in a surfeit of hot dazzle and fruit salad colours.*

*Trevor Fishlock, Daily Telegraph,  
London*

*Summer without the beach is like a love affair without the lover.*

*Meg Stewart, Bondi*

*This Drinking Fountain Must Be Used Only For That Purpose - Use The Toilet For Washing Feet!*

*Sign in the Bondi Beach Pavilion*

THE 'HOT DAZZLE' casts a light of diamond incandescence, which has forged in the Australian face a permanent squint and lop-sided smile. This makes us look laconic when often we are not. Squinting, head at an angle, hands on hips: this is how we are on the beach.

Waking soon after dawn, lying in my teenage bunk in Moore Street, Bondi, I used eagerly to await this light, which announced summer Saturdays. It beamed into my room, refracted from Mrs Esme Cook's red iron roof next door; it lit every particle of dust that rose like a silver escalator from the Feltex floor covering; and it swept the wallpaper (circles

on flowers) like a searchlight, highlighting a three-foot hair-oil stain, the consequence of a family 'discussion'.

The sounds that came with the light belonged to locusts and currawongs. The locusts provided a background of incessant, mad humming. When summer was over they would rise like a black squall of minor Biblical proportions and expire *en masse* over Bob's Gully, where their carcasses lay until March. The currawongs sat on Mrs Esme Cook's iron and tarpaper roof - you could hear them sliding on the corrugations - and they sang and called to each other ceaselessly. Currawongs are garrulous birds with voices like flutes and a range from shrill to almost bass; in full cry they sound like an ornithological Welsh chorus. Ebony black with white plumage, they are a sort of primeval crow whose genetic origins, like birds of paradise and so many Australian creatures, are little known.

Like most scavengers, currawongs are not universally loved; they fix you with a gleaming yellow eye and they dive-bomb and raid nests and eat like goats. They decimated Moore Street's backyard fruit trees, making sorties from Mrs Esme Cook's and the roof of our dunny. 'Get those flamin' birds outta here!' Mrs Cook would say to Ted, her snowy haired husband. I liked those birds: I liked their song and their wickedness. They kicked over the traces with style.

There is a smell and taste that come with the diamond light. By December, when the king tides have arrived from across the south Pacific, the salt spray blows up from the beach. It stiffens the air, covers windows with a sticky mist, corrodes paint on cars and mortar between bricks, and tastes like Bondi and summer. I still run down to the beach with my heart thumping at the prospect; by the time I reach Hall Street and turn into Campbell Parade, which skirts the length of the beach, the spray has the texture of sand. If a 'southerly buster' is blowing, the sand is in my hair, nose, ears, on my tongue. Bondi is the site of one of Sydney's

main sewerage outlets; in an enduring environmental atrocity raw sewage is pumped into the ocean just beyond the last line of breakers. If a hot westerly blows, the nostalgic cocktail is complete: salt, sand and shit.

The beach is Australia's true democracy. Such a notion will infuriate those who do not like the beach, who do not regard Bondi as Hindus regard the Ganges, who prefer to remain grey skeined with sweat rather than covered in carcinogenic rust.

I have a friend like that. He was, admittedly, born way out west, somewhere near the Great Sandy Desert, which his childhood imagination might have conjured as a vast beach without water. Certainly, whenever he has visited me in my Bondi 'office', as he calls the south end of the beach, in order to discuss matters so urgent he is obliged to fill his uncongenial shoes with sand and to wear zinc cream on his nose, his temper is foul, and our friendship is strained. Not even G-stringed sybarites, close at hand, leaven his mood. I have told him he is not a real Australian. He has retorted that I am 'just a bloody expatriate'. The last time I persuaded him to meet me on the beach his ankles turned the colour of freshly boiled beets. He has not forgiven me for this.

The truth is that we Australians did not derive our freedom from bewigged Georgian founding fathers and their tablets of good intentions. There was no antipodean Gettysburg. We are still finding our freedom among condoms on the sand and joggers on the dole, 'banana lizards' on parole and others on illicit business, ageing 'hot doggers' and gays eyeing lifesavers and mums with 'toddlers' and tourists from Osaka. In short, we have found our freedom by taking our clothes off and doing nothing of significance, and by over the years refining and elevating this state of idleness to a 'culture' now regarded highly in the world's most fashionable places.

This is not quite the vibrant image promoted by Paul Hogan. Paul and his people are rich and shiny, and have excellent teeth. We are not like that. Sydney, our greatest city, is only recently glamorised, its skyline only recently Manhattanised, its vocabulary only recently Americanised ('lifts' into 'elevators', 'holidays' into 'vacations', 'I reckon' into 'I guess'), its heroes only recently transmuted from underdogs who struggled to the top to become corporate spivs and money launderers.

Not long ago Sydney was an impoverished city, whose working conditions were at times worse than the worst in England. The sweatshops of east Sydney, with their low wages, long night shifts and unsafe practices - unguarded machinery and floors so hot the soles peeled from your boots - produced an hypnotic routine from working lives. Smoke from industrial chimneys blotted blue skies and congealed winter afternoons into premature night; and the silhouettes that moved along ribbons of tenement houses in the inner city might have been painted by L. S. Lowry. The repossessors, the bailiffs, the Dickensian sharpies, the man who sold clothes-props, were from lives on the edge.

At Central Station the rural poor, white and black, spilled out of the overnight mail trains that come from 'out west', the northern rivers and the southern tablelands, and dragged their cardboard cases, tied with string, to the hostels and a cheap hotel known as the 'People's Palace'. Here there were army surplus stores and greasy spoon Chinese restaurants with newspaper tablecloths and tiled pubs from which people staggered or were thrown.

In Balmain, now gentrified with houses that sell for a million dollars and more, people went hungry. In Paddington - a slum just down the road from Bondi - owl-eyes peered from behind lace curtains and the streets were places for tramps and winos and kids with serge short pants and bloody knees. If you lived in Paddo you were a 'battler' and

a loser. Here, too, houses once rented to battlers and losers sell for a million dollars and more.

Bondi was borderline. Bondi was alleys of litter and smashed beer bottles and fences of rusted corrugated iron, and faded art deco flats, with stairwells that smelt of cabbage, and 'Bondi semis' where the occupants never seemed to turn on the light. Bondi was Jewish refugees who were known as 'reffos' and others who were known as dagos, wogs, Eyties, Baits, Chinks and boongs; and Catholics who were known as tykes; and women who were known as sluts, nymphos, old fowls and 'very nice ladies'.

Bondi was men coughing up their innards in a rush-hour tram because an entire Australian division was mustard-gassed on the Western Front. Bondi was men weaving home on a Saturday night clutching bottles of 'Dinner Ale', shaped like ten-pins, and bottles of Shelley's lemonade for the kids and a chook for the missus: the chook having been 'acquired', or won in a pub raffle. Bondi was domestic trench warfare, with bodies thudding against thin walls, and a woman in an apron led bleeding to an ambulance: street entertainment for the young. Bondi was the inexplicable kindness of shopkeepers; at Mack's Milk Bar and Nick the Fruitologist's they seemed to give away as much as they sold.

In Bondi, even the crankiest streets have a glimpse of the Pacific, if not of the beach itself. Whatever the state of life in the streets, the great sheet of dazzling blue-green is always there, framed between chimneys and dunnies. On weekdays my friend Pete and I would 'scale' a Bondi Beach tram if we spotted an old 'jumping jack' type, which had a peculiarly high suspension and could be bounced off the rails by a swarm of eleven-year-olds synchronising their efforts. And of course Len's apoplexy was part of the fun. Len was a famous Bondi tram conductor who liked his grog and consequently had a face like a crimson ant hill. *'Forcrissake youse kids, you'll gimme a never sprak tan!'*

All principal beaches in Australia are public places. This is not so in the United States and Europe, where the private possession of land and sea is rightly regarded by visiting Australians as a seriously uncivilised practice. Although private property is revered by many Australians, there are no proprietorial rights on an Australian beach. Instead, there is a shared assumption of tolerance for each other, and a spirit of equality which begins at the promenade steps. I ought not to make too much of this, though foreigners, Americans especially, admire it.

Perhaps the reason for this sense of ease is that many on the beach are there to elude and evade: in other words to 'lurk'. Lurking, an Australian pastime, can mean being somewhere you are not meant to be. When I worked in a postal sorting office in Sydney one summer, I would clock on, sort letters for an hour or two, then, with others, slip out through a hole in the back wall. We would then proceed to Bondi for a day of lurking. Indeed, the hole was known as the 'Bondi Hole'. I was told the bosses knew, but they did nothing about it. The attitude this represented was summed up by Jean Curlewis in her book, *Sydney Surfing*, published in 1924. 'Why toil to get rich,' she wrote 'to do exactly the same thing that you are doing now, not rich? Why get all hot and bothered over More Production when the thing you want is produced by the Pacific cost free? It is a philosophy that drives the American efficiency expert into a mental home.'<sup>1</sup>

Whatever racists and Jeremiahs may say, Australia, a society with a deeply racist past, has absorbed dozens of diverse cultures peacefully. The beach and the way of life it represents are central to this. A spectacle at Bondi in the 1950s - second only to the sight of thousands of bathers beating their personal best whenever the shark bell rang - was the arrival on the beach of the first post-war immigrants: Geordies and Cockneys, Calabrians and Sicilians. Bolting lemming-like into a deceptively light surf, they would be duly rescued by lifesavers with a large

trawling net. The ritual was repeated as each national group arrived; Cypriots, Greeks, Lebanese, Turks, Chileans, Mexicans and Chinese.

Today the sons and daughters of these people are often the majority on Bondi Beach, where lifesavers have Italian, Greek and Turkish names and board riders are Vietnamese. Walk at dusk along the colonnade of the Bondi Beach Pavilion and the laughter and banter and music belong to fonner dagos, wogs, Baits and reffos. Call them that at your peril; the beach is theirs now.

From an early age I was aware that what happened on and around the beach posed a threat to the ubiquitous custodians of civic virtue in Australia and was something called pleasure. One such custodian, Eric Spooner, became infamous as the 'Minister for Public Taste'. Eric was responsible for a local law which stated that 'to secure the observance of decency swimming costumes must: (1) have legs at least three inches long; (2) cover the front of the trunk down to the legs; (3) have shoulder straps or other support; and (4) include half a skirt if worn by a bather over the age of twenty years'.<sup>2</sup>

Eric did not understand that grey, tight-lipped Australia ended at the beach promenade, where the nation's lascivious, hedonistic *alter ego* took over. The beach was our secret life. The beach was where most of us would discover sex, no matter that the price was being stung on the arse by a blue-bottle at midnight, or the arrival of a large, uniformed beer gut and damning torchlight. The writer Meg Stewart recalled her 'first time' one New Year's Eve at Bondi when 'after a succession of hopeless parties, a photographer friend and I finally fell into each other's arms at the last party, drove to Bondi, swam naked in the surf, the most magic New Year ever . . . Walking out of the water was not so magical. Headlights blazed, horns blared.'<sup>3</sup>



Perhaps Australian beach life is healthier and freer sexually than anywhere outside the Trobriand Islands. Certainly the dilemma has always been whether to surf or perv. You can do both, of course; but serious surfing and serious perving are almost sectarian pursuits that do not necessarily mix. The south end of Bondi, where clothes have always been unpopular, is best for the latter. It was to the south end that I took Fiona. Fiona was a 1934 Austin Ten, a car for midgets, a coupé with running boards and a 'dicky seat' also known as a 'rumble seat'. It was a model described as 'the original gutless winder'; and named by the previous owner after her mother. Fiona had mechanical brakes which operated with a cable stretched the length of the chassis. This often snapped.

The first time I took my girlfriend to the south end of Bondi the cable snapped and we ended up jammed in the entrance to a barber's shop, with the radiator hissing steam at the barber and a man with lather on his face. When the barber and the man with lather on his face helped us to push Fiona back on the road, the front bumper bar fell off. My girlfriend put it in the dicky seat.

The second time Fiona's brakes snapped, she was parked. It was after midnight and the crescent of beach was spread before us with the sky reflected in its gentle breakers. The hand brake went limp, and with my girlfriend and I otherwise engaged, Fiona proceeded downhill towards a fifty-foot drop on to the rocks below. We awaited our fate. Inexplicably Fiona altered course and rolled instead into the radiator grill of a parked Hupmobile, more a tank than a car. In the back seat of the Hupmobile was a naked, entwined couple. Upon alighting from a seriously concertinaed Fiona, my girlfriend, who was not retiring, put her head through the window of the Hupmobile and said immortally, 'Giddy, howzitgoin'?'

There was another side to this. The few chemists who sold contraceptives kept them under the counter and unavailable

to teenagers. (Wearing a towelling hat, stubble and a falsetto voice sometimes worked.) When girlfriends fell pregnant, which happened frequently, their fear was justified. Few of us told our parents and many took the deafening train across the Harbour Bridge to a notorious chemist who was our tormentor. For weeks he would string the girls along with brightly coloured pills, which of course were fake, while reassuring us that they would 'work'. When the appropriate time had passed, he would make 'the arrangements' with a backyard abortionist for a fee of up to £A200, a huge amount then, especially to impecunious teenagers. Naturally he had a time-payment scheme with interest at 20 per cent. With Fiona on a parking meter outside a dry cleaner's, I waited in dread a day and a night for the 'doctor' to do his job.

Of course our spirit of freedom was not extended to gays. Almost all were in the closet then: a remarkable fact set against the current estimate that a quarter of Sydney's population is homosexual. They hung about the public lavatories, where they were duly set upon by thugs and cops; the Sydney Vice Squad was then run by a detective-sergeant called 'Bumper' Farrell, who had distinguished himself on the Rugby League field by biting an opponent's ear off.

At the southern end of the beach stand Bondi Ocean Baths, dominated by the Bondi Icebergs' Club. Since 1929 the Icebergs have swum through the winter season, from the first Sunday in May to the last Sunday in September. To qualify for membership a prospective Iceberg must swim at least three out of four Sundays 'irrespective of the weather and with good humour . . . for five years'. There is a 90 per cent dropout rate and the club is for men only.<sup>4</sup>

Reg Clark was a Bondi Iceberg who swam through storms. His skin might have been the product of a tannery. Reg said little; his extraordinary power and grace in the water

expressed all that he seemed to want to say. I was eight when Reg taught me to swim seriously. Unsparingly he drove me to his standard, for which I am grateful. With the sun barely up over Bondi Baths, and waves crashing against and over the sea wall, I swam lap upon lap with Reg walking along the wall beside me. He was mostly silent; then a familiar intonation would enter my sodden brain: 'Face down . . . neck down . . . reach out . . . reach out . . . reach out . . . Go!' I was a loyal member of Bondi Swimming Club and raced every Saturday over 50, 100 and 200 yards. Reg would sometimes be there, not speaking but moving his lips: 'Reach out . . . reach out.' When I came second to Murray Rose, who went on to win an Olympic gold medal, Reg was waiting at the finish. 'Wherejageto?' he said, almost smiling.

When the races were over my friend Pete and I would defy Big Norm, who blew the whistle of authority at the baths, and dive from the wall into the ocean. Waiting for a wave to cover the rocks below, plunging into it as it recedes, then grabbing a safety rope slung between the wall and rocks, is a perilous ritual practised by generations of Bondi kids. I missed the rope once, was picked up by the undertow and despatched downward, spinning like a top. I re-emerged with the ocean in my head and gut and blood pouring from 'barnacle rash'. 'Get outta there with that blood,' bellowed Big Norm, 'or the sharks'll have yer!'

Sharks came on overcast days, when the ocean was still and sullen. Pete and I comforted ourselves with talk about sharks being 'blind as bats': a myth that expired one Sunday morning when a shark bit the shank of a boy called Sandy. On the same day Jack Platt, the official Bondi shark catcher, landed a fourteen-foot tiger shark after struggling for an hour and a half in his dinghy. MANEATER! said the front page of the Sydney *Sun* the next day.

A woman called Bea Miles, whom Elsie, my mother, knew as a student, used to dive off Ben Buckler rocks with a large knife in her mouth and look for sharks. Bea had performed brilliantly at university, then 'something snapped', said Elsie, and Bea 'went potty'. For years she was Sydney's most famous 'bag lady', whose speciality was tearing the doors off taxis that refused to pick her up. She often slept on Bondi Beach, like a caravan resting at an oasis, a variety of animals tethered to her button-up boots. Once she arrived on Bondi with a sheep and when the beach inspector told her to take it away, she pointed to a sign that mentioned only dogs and ball games and said nothing about sheep. 'Everyone used to say', said Jack Platt, 'that she was over-educated.'<sup>5</sup>

The great swells, known as bomboras, that sweep around Ben Buckler rocks deliver not the biggest but among the truest bodysurfing waves in Australia. You scout for the swell and watch it build inexorably, while assessing its power and whether it will 'dump'. A 'dumper' begins as a wall of unbroken water and is to be avoided; a 'roller' is an inviting pyramid. Reaching the top of the pyramid before it breaks requires strength, but also a style of swimming that has you skimming the water like a ski. Then, when the wave breaks and you feel the surge and know you are on it, you move your arms to your sides and dip your head; and you are suddenly free and moving down the face of the wave. And then you can raise your head; your torso protrudes from the bank of the wave, like a ship's figurehead. Using your feet as rudder, you can ride all the way to the kids building sandcastles.

Surfboards then were long, hollow, heavy and water-logged. As they picked up speed, rather like my brother's pre-war eight-cylinder Dodge, you needed exceptional strength to control them. Once on course, pity the board rider who failed to keep the bow of the board high and clear of the water. And once the nose dipped, explained Michael

Blakemore, in his fine film, *A Personal History of the Australian Surf*, 'the board dived straight to the bottom where caught in the slingshot of its own buoyancy, it catapulted back into the air like a missile leaving a silo. When that happened you leapt as far clear as you could and stayed submerged until you heard the thump of splashdown. If you lost the board on a wave you were safe, but innocent inshore bathers were in mortal danger.'<sup>6</sup>

Lightweight Malibu boards, made from balsa, were introduced during the 1950s; and bodysurfing lost many of its faithful to the 'hot doggers' of the surf and what was said to be 'high-density stimulation'. There was also a new masonic way of life, not unlike that of the bikers. You rubbed lemon juice or Ajax sink cleaner into your hair to bleach it; you drove an old Volkswagen and you were never satisfied with the surf of one beach only. Alas, I was never a committed hot dogger. I love swimming and bodysurfing too much. Striking out for a wave, then touching the beach at the demise of a perfect 'boomer', seems incomparable; no vehicle is necessary. Or perhaps the real joy is walking the long way back up the beach, legs unsteady, chest rising and falling, and then lying face down on the hot white sand and listening to the rhythm of your heart and feeling the hot dazzle on your back. There is a photograph taken in 1937 by the celebrated Australian photographer Max Dupain, entitled 'The Sunbaker', which appears on the cover of this book. It is of a man of indeterminate age lying on his front on the summer sand. His arms are folded; his head rests sideways on a forearm. There are drops of the ocean on him, and a salt streak across his shoulders. His eyes are closed; I imagine he is me.

For most Australians, who live in congested coastal cities, the foreshore, the beach, is the one link with our ancient continent, about which we know little, whose surface we have grievously disrupted and whose original people we have banished and killed. We see and understand little

beyond the last of the urban red-tiled roofs, but many of us understand well the rhythm of water on sand, of wind on current. A Bondi child will know the feel of a westerly, a nor'easterly and a 'southerly buster'. There is a grace about this life. 'The dolphins and the whales used to come in but we didn't worry about them,' said Jack Platt, the Bondi shark catcher. 'They'd come and knock the barnacles off their backs against the rocks. The porpoises still come in when they're mating . . . hundreds of them. They come in with the westerlies, they all pick their partners and dance [and] go up in the air. It's the most glorious thing to watch . . . just like the surfers, they ride the waves and everything. A real picture.'<sup>7</sup>

Bondi's secret is hidden beneath Campbell Parade on the ocean front. It was here that the first Australians built a network of workshops and armouries in which they fashioned the weapons and tools - axes, spear points and knives - by which they lived and with which they endeavoured to defend their homeland against the white-skinned invaders who landed not far from Bondi. Some of the artefacts of their beach civilisation were found early this century, but most were thereafter buried beneath tarmac and concrete. All but a few of the original people of Bondi died from diseases brought by the invaders; or they were shot or poisoned.

The first Aborigine I ever saw used to play Country and Western songs on a battered twelve-string guitar in the great urinals that were the public bars of Billy the Pig's at Bondi Junction and the Royal on Bondi Road. As a newspaper boy I was allowed in during the 'Six o'Clock Swill', when the pubs closed. I noticed that the drinkers seemed kind to the Aborigine, and threw coins into his hat. 'The boong's worth a zac [sixpence],' they'd say, 'give him a fair go.' In return he was obsequious in his appreciation, but his eyes were opaque and not at all grateful. He was called