

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Jolly Marsupial

Jilly Cooper

## About the Book

More infectious humour and witty observations from Jilly Cooper, whose collection of articles, originally published in *The Sunday Times* and the *Mail on Sunday*, includes a light-hearted and irreverent account of a visit to Australia, published for the first time in its entirety. Scenes nearer home, viewed with equal disrespect include the diverse worlds of a vet's conference, fashionable charity balls, the London to Brighton run and Hen Night in Wandsworth. And, as always, Jilly Cooper is a devastating, hilarious and sometimes moving chronicler of the minutiae of family life, with some fascinating sidelights and side-swipes at the middle-class educational rat race along the way.

This set of writings will prove once again Jilly Cooper's ability to provoke, fascinate and - above all - amuse!

# CONTENTS

*Cover*

*About the Book*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

*Acknowledgements*

*Foreword*

## DOWN UNDER

Pom on the run

Feminist fatale

## OTHER SCENES

Vets' conference

The jut set

This little pig went a-marketing

Brighton or bust

## LEARNING THE HARD WAY

The cruel C.E.

Yally Hoojah

School crawl

## FURTHER SCENES OF REVELRY

Charitably having a ball

Swallows and amazons

## MEN, WOMEN AND OTHER CLOSE RELATIONS

Roasting Spare Rib

The day of the wimp

The last of the summer whine

Mind the step

Middle-aged wife's tale

About the Author  
Also by Jilly Cooper  
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# JOLLY MARSUPIAL

Down under and other scenes

Jilly Cooper

To my father-in-law Leonard Cooper  
with love and admiration

My thanks are due to the editors of *The Sunday Times* and of the *Mail on Sunday* in which most of these articles first appeared.

## *Foreword*

In this new volume of collected pieces which have appeared in various newspapers and magazines during the past three years, I am particularly glad to have the opportunity to publish in full what I actually wrote about my visit to Australia in 1980. Of the original fifteen-thousand-word piece, *The Sunday Times* only used 8,000 words and edited it in a way, and provided it with a headline ('Land of the Suntanned Snobs') that seriously distorted what I wanted to say. Likewise various Australian newspapers either took umbrage at what they read in *The Sunday Times* or reprinted only the sections of the original piece that suited them: as often as not they had geographical reasons for this. The net result of all these extracts was a surge of angry letters from Australians all over the world, and a great many English people, who thought I had been not only unfair but offensive.

Now I have the opportunity to put the situation to rights and even if the piece in its entirety, as originally written, does offend some people, which I suppose it is bound to, at least it is as I intended it to be. I had a wonderful time in Australia; I loved the land, the people I met, and I hope I have conveyed the enthusiasm that I felt. I think I can honestly say that they were three of the most exciting weeks of my life. Not many people on their first trip have the opportunity to visit all the major cities of that vast continent in such a short time, and I must record my gratitude to my publishers, Methuen (and Methuen of Australia) for making the whole thing possible.



Newspapers are often forced to make cuts and apply the occasional fig leaf, for reasons of space and their readers' blood pressure. At least here you read the unexpurgated version, warts, other appendages and all, of not only my Australian piece but also several other articles from the same period.

Among the other pieces included in this volume are the first two long articles on men I wrote for the new *Mail on Sunday* (here published together as 'The day of the wimp'). After thirteen and a half years I decided to leave *The Sunday Times* and seek fresh pastures. I only hope that by the time this book appears, the grass will still be as green on the other side of the fence as it seems to be at the moment.

May 1982

Down under

## *Pom on the run*

FEW PEOPLE CAN have set out for Australia with more trepidation than I did. A week before I left I saw a programme on television called *Kerry Packer and the Poms*, which gave me a taste of the rabidly anti-English sentiment I might expect. Then a very unsunny lady from the *Melbourne Sun* came to interview me in London and asked why the hell was I going there to promote a silly book on the English class system when Australia was a classless society anyway. Finally the itinerary for the tour arrived. In ten days it included a punishing total of sixty-eight interviews with press, television and radio, three launching parties, five speeches, and 36,000 miles of flying to eight different cities, including Singapore and Hong Kong.

Arriving in Sydney at seven o'clock in the morning, however, we were met not by a shower of tins, or by a snarling Dennis Lillee bowling bumpers, but by a couple of pot-bellied health inspectors who solemnly entered the plane and sprayed us with flit.

'No wonder that fly got off at Singapore,' said my husband.

Inside the airport there was a dearth of trolleys and a plethora of beautiful suntanned girls, their faces gleaming greeny-brown like poplar leaves in spring. A kind man helped us carry our cases. A kind woman showed me where the paper towels were hidden in the Ladies. On the loo wall, someone had scribbled: 'Keep Australia Green - Have Sex with a Frog.'

Waiting like zombies in the cafeteria for our flight to Brisbane, we watched a man breakfast off chocolate milk shake and oysters. At the bar two men in blazers were drinking beer.

At Brisbane we were met by our tour organizer, a splendid Brunhilda with waist-length brown hair and a flawless skin called Elsa Petersen. True to her namesake, she behaved towards us throughout the tour like a kindly lioness with two very wayward cubs. When I grumbled that I'd never last the pace, she promptly presented me with some vitamin pills. According to the label, they were 'for use in pregnancy, alcoholism and advanced liver complaints'. This seemed somewhat drastic, but once I got over the shock of drinking neat Tizer for breakfast every morning, they worked wonders. All Australians live on vitamin pills.

First impressions of Brisbane were hazy: trees with great grey trunks shaped like Indian clubs; women with parasols; brilliant dogs balancing on the top of moving cars and open lorries, who barked when the lights went green; houses perched on stilts, with steps up to the front door; and balconies fretted at the top and bottom like lace Victorian Christmas cards.

We drove past Breakfast Creek, where one of the first explorers had breakfast in the early 1800s, and headed for the nearest pub, where a large notice said 'Shirts are requested to be worn during mealtimes'. Wherever you go in Australia, you are bombarded with sartorial instructions.

Later we passed umbrella trees, the Ithaca Ice Works, the Don Juan Waterbed Shop, and a poodle parlour (where you could have your dog 'fluff dried' for four dollars), but found nowhere open for lunch. It was the Saturday after ANZAC day.

Giving up, we returned to our hotel room, where we were greeted by a fridge full of miniatures, and a ringing telephone. It was two of my husband's ex-warehousemen,

now living in Brisbane, who came over for a drink. When they worked in England, they had always had to struggle to make ends meet. Now, doing the same job, they have their own houses with swimming pools, beautifully cut suits, children at private schools, and enough spare money to take their families out to restaurants whenever they want to. One of them brought his Australian wife. Immediately the sexes divided. My husband talked to his ex-warehousemen, while I talked to the wife, who admitted that any woman who tried to barge in on all-male conversation would be considered a tart.

Brisbane at dusk was magical. The huge river turned to mother-of-pearl under its Meccano bridge, a lemon-yellow sunset gilded the grey-green acacias and softened the rose-pink roofs and the trellis of pylons along the hills. Reeling from jet lag I collapsed into bed and embarked on the first of a series of interrupted nights, this one punctuated by Tarzan howls from a wedding party in the next door bedroom.

**Sunday Brisbane:** Woke feeling profoundly depressed at the thought of trying to promote a book on class in a classless society. Elsa arrived at midday to collect us. She had been staying with her mother, who had told her it was very vulgar to wear white shoes. Driving to lunch, we passed a beautiful hill dotted with large white houses each with its own rich ruff of trees.

'That's the toff area,' explained Elsa. For a moment I thought she'd said 'tough area', but actually the two adjectives are often synonymous in Australia, which boasts a very high population of upper-middle-class criminals - or 'crims' as they are called. Very little stigma is attached to going inside, admittedly not very difficult in Brisbane, where anyone involved in an abortion gets fourteen years, and where it's against the law to go on demonstrations.

We lunched on Filet Tiara with Peter Charlton of the *Brisbane Telegraph* and his wife Helen. Peter, who with his fair hair and reddish moustache looks like an officer in the Scots Guards, was very happy to explode the myth of a classless Australia. Doctors used to be the top of the social scale, he said, but they'd lost caste since the advent of Medibank (Australia's equivalent of our Health Service). Now judges were regarded as the smartest profession (presumably they're also the busiest putting all those 'crims' inside). He finally added that the Australians had hated Brearley because he was too upper class and couldn't bat either.

Touring Brisbane later, we noticed the great number of trees to each house, and the way luscious plants jut out of the most uncompromising yellow rock. We passed the Albert Street Methodist Church, beloved of John Betjeman, with its brilliant terracotta brick, and the fountain which only runs at weekends to save money, of which you can buy plastic replicas for your garden in purple, pink, and blue.

According to Elsa, the river often overflows. Once the first two floors of her office were flooded, and they all rowed in to save the Telex machine. 'When we got there, we all sat round the boardroom table, opened the fridge and drank what was in it.'

On to a rugger match - where a large sign told us that pensioners and schoolboys in uniform would only be charged 22 cents. The ground was pretty soft by Australian standards - at least there was grass on it, but every time anyone took a kick, two minions had to rush on with a bucket and build a sandcastle to hold the ball. The players were so lean and bronzed and fit - it looked more like a beach ball anyway. A man wandered past with 'Save Water' on the front of his T-shirt, and 'Bath with a Friend' on the back. A flock of ibises drifted across the cornflower-blue sky. Gradually it was sinking in that we were really in Australia.

Helen Charlton talked resignedly of the Australian male's obsession with sport. When they were adopting their first baby, Peter rang up his rugger club to explain that he couldn't make training that evening as they had to pick up the baby.

'Why can't you pick it up tomorrow?' asked the captain in deepest indignation.

Helen had also given up making rugger teas. There was not much joy in making hundreds of sandwiches and cream cakes, if all the players did was hurl them at each other.

At half-time, a siren went, and everyone ate crumbled vealies, Dagwood red sausages and square pies. Australia is a land of harsh rules, which everyone breaks. Another large sign by the bar announced that liquor must not be consumed beyond this point, but was defied by a shingle of empty tins all round the boundary - a sort of Beer Canute.

Peter, a member of the TA, took us back to his officers' mess after the game. Looking at the regimental silver, and the photographs of moustacheoed, double-barrelled DSOs round the walls, one realized how English some of Australia is, and understood, for the first time, the bitterness at our joining the Common Market.

'It is very hard,' said Peter, 'for us whose fathers fought and died in the war to have to queue to get into England, while men from Germany walk straight through.'

We dined with Blair Edmunds, who runs the largest local radio station, and who looked like Hermann Prey. His friend, Ian, is a schoolmaster, with wonderful blackberry dark eyes. They have two Afghans, a beautiful house full of paintings, and a bright green loo seat. Other guests included a high-court judge who'd recently won a Father of the Year award, and his wife, a deliberately understated American academic, who promptly told us that, as a fine arts professor, she earned one of the highest salaries in Australia.

Dinner was wonderful, cooked by Blair and Ian, and consisting of palest green courgette soup, followed by mammoth prawns called Moreton Bay Bugs, duck in black cherry sauce, and home-made pistachio ice-cream - all to a background of the eight sides of *Fidelio* played *fortissimo*.

For a classless society, conversation was decidedly upmarket. Someone exquisitely described a socially ambitious neighbour as being 'Not only self-made, but self-hyphenated as well'. The judge told me he came from a distinguished family. His wife described the size of her family vault, and the family silver given to her grandfather by the King of Morocco. Recently she'd met Prince Charles when he visited Australia, and regarded him as a considerable intellectual. They had sat together on a sofa, kicked off their shoes to relieve their aching feet, and discussed mezzo-sopranos.

'Charles,' she added emphatically, 'knows his Grace Bunbury (*sic*) backwards.'

Talk moved on to the ostentation of the local millionaire, who on being awarded the OBE had it made up in diamonds as a single ear-ring. He also had the 'J' of his sheep brand made into diamond ear-rings for his wife. Lunching with him recently, guests had been slightly startled when a particularly handsome stallion kept flashing past the window like a windscreen wiper. Later they discovered the horse was being specially whipped back and forth by a couple of farm-hands.

Finally, the judge launched an attack on the appalling meanness of the English - particularly the upper classes. An aristocratic couple and their grown-up son had evidently recently descended on him for a fortnight without asking.

As his wife was away, the poor judge had had to cook for them three times a day. (On one occasion the son was going into town and he asked him to pick up a bottle of milk and was promptly asked for the money.) Finally, after a week, unable to bear it any longer the judge had fled to Sydney,



whereupon they demanded housekeeping money for their remaining week.

Having experienced generous and riotous hospitality ourselves we slunk to bed at 1.30, feeling bitterly ashamed of our countrymen.

**Monday Brisbane:** Picked up at 8.30 for my first radio phone-in. Shakes were not entirely due to nerves. The interviewer had a beard, wore khaki shorts, glared at me fiercely, and gave me a far from easy ride on class distinction in England. Afterwards people rang in, English immigrants grumbling at how undisciplined Australian children were, Australians grumbling at how dictatorial and unimaginative English parents and nannies were. My interviewer looked even more disapproving and, while I was stumbingly answering a question on poverty in England, shoved a note across the table which divided us. On it he had written:

NUN (*to Mother Superior*): We have a case of VD.

MOTHER SUPERIOR (*absent-mindedly*): Oh, put it in the cellar, it will make a nice change from the usual Beaujolais.

With great self-control I managed not to scream with laughter, but my answer on poverty was not as lucid as it should have been.

Radio stations in Australia are amazingly smart, shag-pile on the wall, beautiful girls and forests of plants at every entrance. At the next station, I talked to Hayden, who was polite and elegant and an ex-minister; and at the next, to Alan, who had slanting fox's eyes, said he was hungry, and that I sounded like an upper-class wanker when I called people 'Darling'. I'd get on much better in Australia, he added sternly, if I addressed people as 'Pal' or 'Chum'. Felt this was too reminiscent of dog food ads to carry real

conviction in my case. As we left, the weather men who had predicted rain were peering anxiously out of the window at an untroubled sapphire-blue sky.

On to the University of Queensland, surrounded by vast yucca plants, the crevices of which everyone used as litter bins. Interviewed by bad-tempered girl with short hair and a large bottom, who told me truculently that their station accepted no advertising, or government support, and that all staff decided their own salary - and asked what England was going to do about poverty. Talked woollily about National Assistance and Legal Aid, and totally failed to insert the words 'Pal' or 'Chum'.

Leaving the Too Wong Baptist Church, Oscar Wilde Street, and Chippendale Street, we climbed up a winding road through forests of eucalyptus trees to Channel 7. Very disappointed not to see koala bears, but Elsa said they would be asleep in the trees, probably zonked out on eucalyptus leaves.

On reaching Channel 7, we found the entire television station in a state of uproar because they'd been stealing all Channel 9's celebrities and Channel 9 had been stealing all theirs. Elsa whispered that my navel was showing in my cream jump suit, and handed me a safety-pin. Interviewed by very beautiful girl in a beige dress called Donna who said she *had* been going to read my book, but she'd gone camping instead.

Collapsed into nearest bar, and drank two huge Bloody Marys. If every day was going to be as rigorous as this, I'd never stand the pace. Yet another notice warned us that the Management would refuse service to anyone not properly dressed. Perhaps Elsa's safety-pin had been a good idea after all.

The bar overlooked a dusty track lined with palm trees, and white slatted houses backing on to mysterious dark-green mango groves. In the scorching sunlight, the influences seemed to come from New Orleans, the Wild

West, and India all at the same time. But round the corner instead of Gary Cooper with a bootlace moustache, came the postman bicycling in shorts. Elsa said that when she was a child, the postman went on his rounds with two horses, one to ride, the other to carry the mail.

On to Channel 9, which was also in an uproar because the man who'd been going to interview me had been stolen that morning by Channel 7, and a new presenter had just taken over. The make-up people had been rather over generous with the Pan-stik, and he now had a bright yellow face like a large Jaffa orange. The telephone rang continually with journalists clamouring for interviews. He had been going to read my book, he said apologetically, but alas someone had stolen it. At least he hadn't gone camping. 'Did I feel Australia was a classless society?' 'No,' I said, 'it's full of upper-middle-class crims.'

SYDNEY

Flew to Sydney feeling utterly knackered. One symbol of the Australian good life is the confetti of bright-blue swimming pools beside every house seen from the plane as you come into land. Everyone in Sydney seemed to be wearing Campari-pink track suits. On the way to our hotel, we passed another Don Juan Waterbed shop, and a man's hairdresser called Stallion, which had a sign outside of a rearing horse with a luscious Carmen-rolled mane.

**Tuesday Sydney:** Spent absolutely punishing day whizzing from radio stations to television studios, being followed by beautiful lynx-eyed journalist called Gail Heathcote, and moustacheoed trendy photographer - a sort of Denim Lillee.

First interview with John Laws, who, I was warned beforehand, 'has quite a good personality' (whoever she might be). He turned out to be lean, craggy and has attractive as a Western Hero, and clad from his Seiko