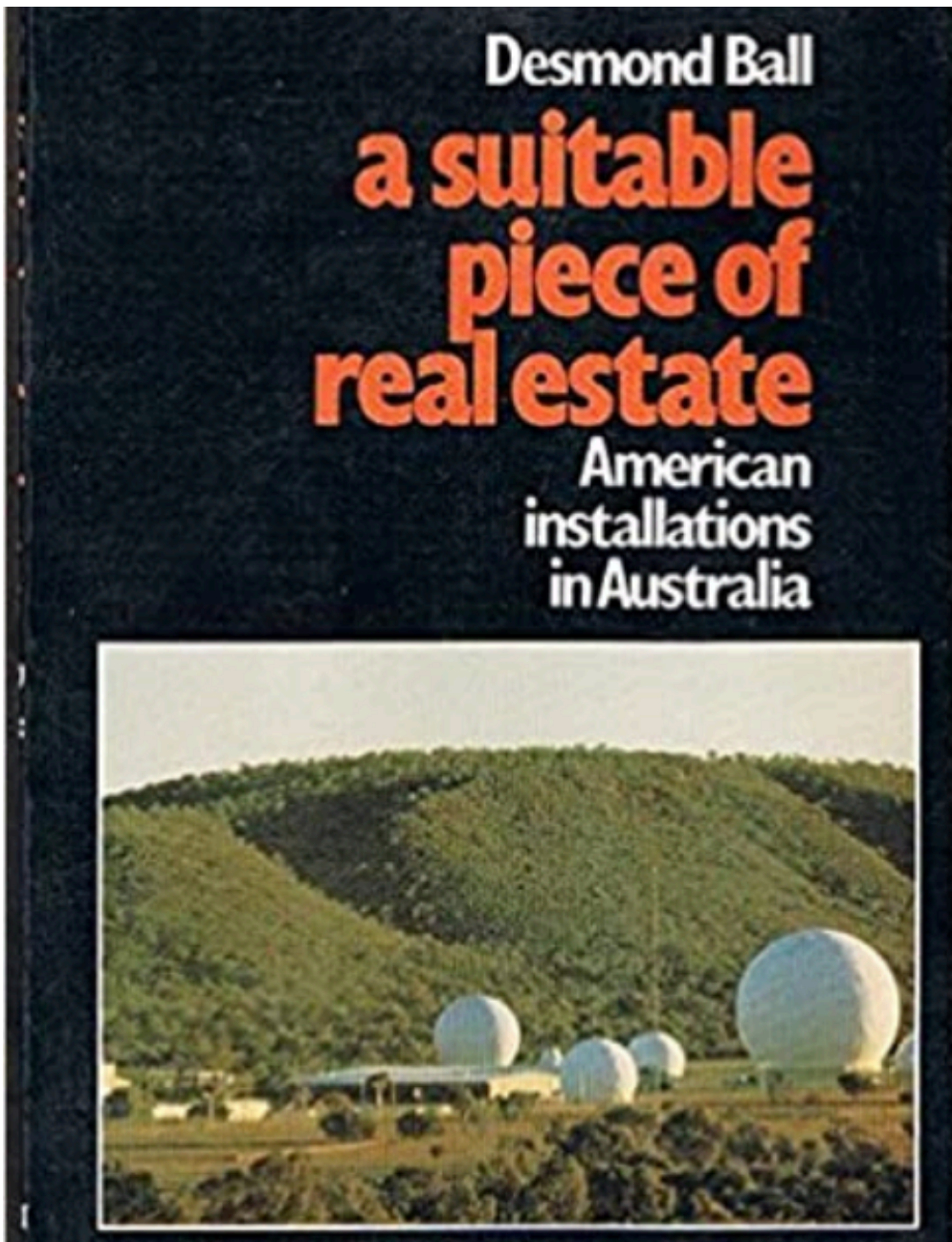


My Visit To Australia



Pine Gap - Outside of Alice Springs

It was October 1981 when someone came into the office talking about a linguist stationed in Australia who needed to come home for an extended period. They were looking for someone to take his place for the months of November, December and January. I immediately volunteered.

The trip from Baltimore, MD to Alice Springs, Australia was a long one. I flew Continental Airlines, business class. The initial route was from Baltimore to Los Angeles to Hawaii, to the Fiji Islands, to Sydney. I took a taxi from the Sydney airport to a hotel. That afternoon, I walked around the neighborhood, stopped at a restaurant for dinner, then crashed in my room, exhausted from the long flight.

The next morning, it was a taxi back to the airport, where I caught a local flight from Sydney to Adelaide. Adelaide is an attractive city on the southern coast with beautiful beaches. They put me up in the five-star Grosvenor Hotel in the center of the city. The main streets downtown were closed to vehicular traffic and were crowded in the evening with pedestrians out shopping, eating and enjoying a variety of live entertainment. I would like to have stayed there more than just one day.

I forgot to mention that, as soon as you step off an airplane in Australia, you immediately recognize that you are in a very different place. Everything around you: the flora, the fauna, the people, the dress, the air is different. You are now "Down Under."

The next morning, I caught another local flight from Adelaide to Alice Springs where I was met by a representative from the site where I would be working. He drove me to the site, got me settled into a room, then took me to a picnic that was in progress. This is where I made the first language-related mistake. I had eaten a big breakfast at the Grosvenor and was not hungry. Some ladies at the picnic insisted that they fill my plate and I responded with, "Oh no! I'm really stuffed and can't eat another bite." You should have seen the look on their faces when I said that. When they insisted one more time, I repeated, "I am

completely stuffed." It turns out that "stuffed" in Australian colloquialism is "fucked." They explained that to me and commented that it was a frequent mistake by tourists who go into shops and ask for stuffed Koala bears.

When taken to my room the first time, I noticed that outside the door of all the rooms were long sticks with a 'Y' prong on the end. I asked what they were and the answer was, "There are 20 species of snakes in the area and 17 of the 20 are deadly poisonous. The 'Y' prongs were for pinning down the head of the snake.

I soon settled into a routine which went pretty much like this: Wake up, shower, shave, dress and walk across the street to the dining hall for breakfast. The dining hall was impressive with excellent food. One could order eggs cooked any way, omelets, pancakes, French toast, whatever. After breakfast, it was a short walk to the operations building where there was ample coffee and a good supply of doughnuts and other pastries. I think I gained about 10 pounds during my stay there. My favorite dinner was Barramundi which the chef cooked to perfection.

After work, it was dinner in the dining hall, followed by a different movie every day. I saw more movies during those three months than I had seen during my life up to that point. Only a few were memorable. Most were easily forgotten. I think it was there that I met Gareth Davies, a Welshman who ran the projector for the after-dinner movie. His primary job was as a gardener, keeping the site's landscaping looking good. He was a big, strong, imposing character. I later learned that nearly everyone on the site was afraid of him. Apparently, someone had caused him to lose his temper and he seriously injured the offending party. I can't put my finger on it, but I immediately found him to be interesting. I particularly liked the way he talked, in a slow, musical, Welsh brogue. Knowing that my ancestry is Welsh, I think I was eager to be acquainted with a real Welshman.

In any event, Gareth and I became good friends. After the movie, we would go to the recreation area and play pool. I learned that Gareth was

interested in photography. He told me that he wanted to buy a good camera and asked me if I would help teach him how to use it. We went shopping and found a good 35mm SLR. I spent some time tutoring him on use of the camera, after which we made a number of photo safaris together.

On one of our off days, we headed to the outback. Our route took us through downtown Alice Springs. The road runs along a riverbed which was totally dry with dust being kicked up in the air by the wind. We drove on, out of the town and into the outback to the northeast. We spent the entire day with Gareth taking photographs with his new camera. There were a lot of really good photo opportunities which included a tree standing alone which had been struck by lightning and burned but still standing. There were rock formations, kangaroos, wallabies, interesting plants and trees.

While we were out photographing, a big storm had passed over Alice Springs. On the way back home, we drove that same road along the dry river bed. However, it was no longer dry but raging with flood water carrying big logs and other debris along.

Summer in Alice Springs is quite an experience. The temperature was consistently over 100 degrees, sometimes reaching 120 or more. Stepping out of the room was like stepping into a blast furnace. I played quite a bit of tennis while there. Luckily, there was a swimming pool next to the tennis courts. We could only play a couple games before our feet became so hot that we would drop our rackets and jump into the pool to cool off. These games were late in the evening when the sun was about to set.

I'll never forget being awakened one morning by extremely loud thunder. I opened the door of my room and looked out to see a sky that was pitch black from horizon to horizon. Huge bolts of lightning were streaking down to the ground from the black sky. This activity kept up for at least half an hour but, amazingly, there was never one drop of rain. One of the lightning bolts struck a nearby tree where a flock of cockatoos had settled, killing many of them. One of the residents

pointed at the dead birds and said something like, "That's about \$50,000 dollars of dead birds you are looking at." He said those birds sell at a high price in the U.S.

I had a portable radio in my room. One day, a song came on the radio that caught my attention. It was "Down Under" by Men At Work. The radio had a cassette recorder and I was able to record the entire song when it was played again later. I wanted to take it home and play it for Charlie and Andrea. This was in early November.

The night skies in central Australia are breathtaking. There was a small Meade telescope at the site which I used many times to ogle the southern skies.

I made several other friends while there, all of them Australians. Strangely enough, I found the Americans stationed there not to be very friendly. I suppose it was because they had their own families and lives there. I spent 24 hours on site, whereas they were only there for an eight-hour shift, then left for home. One friend became my tennis partner, another was a cook who immigrated from Italy. The cook and Gareth and I took many trips to town on off days.

When I left for home at the end of January, Gareth gave me a book about the English language. I've been looking for it, but it's probably lost.

I dearly missed Shelia and the kids and wrote letters almost daily. I talked to Shelia on the phone a few times during those three months. We decided to meet in Hawaii on my way home.

The day before Shelia was due to fly out, Air Florida Flight 90 crashed into the 14th St. bridge over the Potomac river. She flew out of BWI, but her flight was delayed because of mechanical troubles, causing her to miss her connection in Chicago. The airline upgraded her to first class on the next flight out. Amazingly, we arrived at the Honolulu airport at nearly the same time. Shelia was a sight for sore eyes. Neither

her or my luggage arrived with us, so we took a taxi to the hotel without our luggage. It was delivered to the hotel later that evening. Our hotel was right on Waikiki beach, on a corner across the street from Fort Derussy Beach Park. It had been recommended to me by Denny Pagels, a Persian linguist friend. The restaurant in the hotel was very popular with the locals, including police and firefighters. I'll never forget the amazing pineapple French toast. Shelia and I spent several days there, swimming and sightseeing. We saw many shows, walked all over Honolulu, drove up to Diamond Head and took tours. One of the tours circled the entire island.

When finally back home in Maryland, I played "Down Under" for the kids. They both turned their nose up at it. A few months later, either Charlie or Andie came running to me saying, "Dad, there's this really cool new song out!" Yes, it was "Down Under" by Men at Work.