

*AFTER DINNER SPEECH TO THE COTMA CONFERENCE, BENDIGO, 1994*

Presenter: Geoffrey Claydon

I had spent all my life in Europe. Then, a quarter of a century ago, tired of the tranquil pleasures of such places as Berlin and Sarajevo, I determined to break out and see the rest of the world. Naturally I chose, as my first country to visit, Australia.

Now it is true to say that in selecting Australia, I did so with just a touch of apprehension. I had observed that on the cricket and rugby fields Australians appeared at times not always to show the deference due to the former colonial power. Then again, I had been given to understand that the British were called "Poms" or "Pommies". Although I didn't know the origin of these expressions, they didn't altogether convey quite the impression of respect and dignity which was clearly called for. Furthermore, my apprehension turned to alarm when even before setting foot in the place, news of my pending visit had got out among the tram fans here and I got the message back that "they don't want a stuffed-shirt Pom coming to tell them what to do!"

But the day came for me to embark on my journey. I attracted curious glances from commuters on the London Underground as I set off on a frosty February morning in 1969, dressed in a natty light-weight suit and straw hat. My point of arrival in Australia was Brisbane, since I was aware that the Tramway there was due to close the following April. The temperature was a humid 38 degrees. The contrast between this and chilly London, plus jet lag, meant that I had not felt inclined to eat anything before attending my first meeting. This was with George Baker, the Workshop Superintendent at the Brisbane Workshops at Milton.

My travelling companion was Dr Jim Jordan, who at that time worked at the Chiswick bus works of London Transport. George Baker had also worked for London Transport, so the meeting was convivial. When over, George said, "How about a drink?" Given the temperature, I readily fell in with this idea. We picked up the Deputy Manager *en route* - a chap called Warwick, whose surname I've forgotten. Then to a bar - my first visit to an antipodean pub! I was asked what I would like to drink. Cautiously I replied, "What do you drink?" "Rum and coke" came the response. Now I had tasted Coca-Cola one desperate day in Paris and had made a mental note never to renew my acquaintance with it. However, I thought it courteous to go along with the suggestion. On tasting the drink, it hardly touched the sides: it was delicious. "Have another" urged our hosts. Then another, and another. Gradually, Jim and I were permitted to stand our rounds. And so it went on till closing time - all on an empty stomach!

On leaving the bar, we piled into Warwick's car, which made its unsteady way back to the centre of the city for us to be deposited at our hotel. This chanced to be a temperance hotel in Queen Street. Not merely was it not licensed to sell intoxicants; it was run by a temperance league! I staggered up the steps and demanded my room key in slurred tones while clinging precariously to the reception desk. Then, to the horror of the management, I insisted on being taken up in the service lift. So ended my first day in Australia.

We went on to visit Ballarat and Bendigo, then still run by the SEC. We saw the legendary Basil Miller. He was the only Australian I have met who used the expression "fair dinkum", an expression which according to British mythology all Australians use all the time. In Melbourne, we had the great privilege of meeting General Sir Robert Risson, who took us to lunch at the Australia Club in William Street. With its stuffed leather chairs and port, it was just like being back in England.

We were conducted around Melbourne by Dudley Snell, who was many years later to die in sad circumstances while installing the Tuen Mun tramway in Hong Kong. I remember him saying, when Jim Jordan wanted to go to the bus works, "You don't want to go to that nasty smelly bus works, Mr Claydon, do you? Let's go to the nice clean Preston workshops". Then, on another occasion, as we were bowling along in a chauffeur-driven car, he tapped the chauffeur on the shoulder and told him to keep off the part of the road surface maintained by the Tramway, so as to avoid wearing it out!

And so I fell in love with Australia. I could say the same about New Zealand; another wonderful country. But tonight I thought it right to concentrate on Australia.

It has therefore been a very great pleasure to be in Oz again and at a COTMA conference. The accommodation here at the LaTrobe University campus has been excellent. Speaking of accommodation, I don't know whether you have been sharing yours. Certainly I have. I share mine with the photocopying machine. It has a fair number of visitors. I see dear old Dennis O'Hoy there, affable as ever. Yesterday, I was having a great shower.

I had just reached that moment when you're groping for a towel, when the door whammed open and a cheery guy said; "Just come to check your meter, sir!". I looked around, wondering what depraved Australian practice this was. Then I found that he had come to record the reading on the photocopier!

Seriously, though, it has been both an instructive and an enjoyable experience to be here. Apart from the excellence of the arrangements provided by the Bendigo Trust - even laying on a derailment for our diversion - on a personal note I have deeply appreciated the warmth of the reception shown to me. I have also admired the efficiency of the COTMA organisation and the sense of dedication on the part of the participants. This has been no binge. With an organisation and attendance such as we have seen here, you can look forward to the future with every confidence.

So I think it appropriate to give you a toast. I ask you to join with me in a toast to COTMA - long may it prosper.