

Down Under¹

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 inscrutable² people, the Aborigines, who have no clearly evident racial or linguistic kinship³ to their neighbors in the region, and whose presence in Australia can only be explained by positing⁴ that they
5 invented and mastered ocean-going craft⁵ 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 ever⁶ bothered⁷ with the open sea again.

It is an accomplishment so singular and extraordinary, so uncomfortable with scrutiny, that most histories breeze over it⁸ in a paragraph or two, then move on to the second, more explicable invasion — the one
10 that begins with the arrival of Captain James Cook and his doughty⁹ little ship HMS Endeavour in Botany Bay in 1770. Never mind that Captain Cook didn't discover Australia and that he wasn't even yet 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
15 Pacific. Its creatures seemed to have evolved as if they had misread the manual. The most characteristic of them didn't run or lope¹⁰ or canter¹¹, but bounced¹² across the landscape, like dropped balls. The continent teemed¹³ with unlikely life. It contained a fish that could climb trees; a fox that flew (it was actually a very large bat); crustaceans so large 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 percent of all that lives in Australia,
20 plant and animal, exists nowhere else. More than this, it exists in an abundance that seems incompatible with the harshness of the environment. Australia is the driest, flattest, hottest, most desiccated, infertile, and climatically aggressive of all the inhabited continents.

Down Under — Bill Bryson, 2000

¹ Informal: in or to Australia or New Zealand

² impénétrable

³ part of a family

⁴ (to) postulate

⁵ boats capable of crossing oceans

⁶ rarement

⁷ (ici) s'intéresser

⁸ survoler

⁹ brave

¹⁰ courir en bondissant

¹¹ petit galop

¹² rebondir

¹³ Be full of