

# The progress of Australian humour in Britain<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*In this essay, reprinted from a 1997 collection, Christie Davies discussed the roots and the nature of Australian humour.*

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There has long been a close link between both the comedy and, by implication, the sense of humour of British and Australians. Such distinctively British radio and television programs as Hancock's *Half Hour* and *Till Death Do Us Part* found their main overseas market in Australia rather than in other English-speaking countries. Americans either did not find them funny or else were not allowed to find them funny, or provided feeble imitations such as Archie Bunker. Only the Australians were able and willing to share the British sense of humour. The other side of this relationship is that Australian comedians such as Dick Bentley, Joy Nicholls, Bill Kerr, Rolf Harris, Barry Humphries and Kevin Bloody Wilson, having succeeded in Australia, have gone on to be successful in Britain as well. Clearly the same formulae work in both countries.

However, over time there has been a major change in the way in which Australian comedians and the Australian sense of humour and use of language have been presented to British audiences and readers. Until the mid-1960s there is a sense in which Australian comedians performing in England were invisible. The Australian identity of comedians of Australian origin was clearly acknowledged and accepted in England, but was not exploited by their British script writers and producers to any great extent. At that time, to be Australian in Britain was just one more alternative way of being British, rather than a comic identity to be used in a contrasting way, set against the identity of the Pommies themselves. Also, the British

lacked a knowledge of Australian English and would have been unable to appreciate joking based on Australian speech and on the contrast between that speech and their own.

Their ignorance was not just a result of geographical distance, but also of censorship, both in Britain and in Australia itself. The most distinctive aspect of Australian English, particularly when it is being used humorously, lies in its creative use of obscenities. However, until recently it was not possible to publish or broadcast much distinctively Australian oral humour, because of its extreme crudity and coarseness. If anything, the censorship restrictions preventing the use of this coarse humour in a public and transmittable context was stronger in Australia than in Britain itself. Australian humour could not be exported to Britain and even if it safely reached the latter country, the British authorities prevented its further dissemination. Two layers of censorship lay between the Australian genius for crude humour and a potentially willing, but ignorant and depraved, British audience.

The nature of Australian humour and the way it has been constrained by censorship has been well expressed by Hiram Davis and Peter Crofts (1988: 8):

The hotel functions as a vernacular museum for verbal Australian humour. Beehives of indigenous oral comedy—Oz-lingo, rhyming slang, ockerisms, and larrikin slanguage—are integral parts of the speech pat-terns of Australians. The most popular is strong language, otherwise known as swearing, and its use is am-bivalent. One use is as a term of endearment; “G’day you bloody old bastard” is a common form used by Australians when they greet one another. The other is a form of abuse, particularly against people in authority. Censorship has been the main obstacle in the past preventing Australian humour surfacing because its essence is unprintable. Australians have a certain sense of shame about the crudeness of their humour. It is both a giving and sharing experience—but only for males. It is a thread of commitment that has developed into an entire subculture, which to this day remains largely untapped. Being highly coloured, its one-dimensionality effectively maintains this humour as a male preserve.

In the early 1960s, a number of books were published in Australia which sought to cultivate an appreciation of Australian English, its distinctiveness and its humorous potential. Excellent though they were, they failed to achieve the main objective for two reasons. First, because they had to be cautious in the way in which, and the extent to which, they could reveal and revel in the full glory of Australian obscenity. The mood of the grim Australian censor was not that of Erasmus or Rabelais, but of Sir Les Patterson (in his official, puritanical mode; see Humphries & Garland 1988: v) and the Council of Trent. A few six-letter, but no four-letter, words got past him. Second, these books circulated mainly amongst Australians who appreciated them either as pieces of nostalgia or as examples of their own immigrant enlightenment. In both cases the writings would have been seen as amusing.

However, the great mass of Poms back in England did not get to read these books and probably would not have appreciated them if they had. For local readers in Australia, the books hinted at an oral tradition of delightful crudity and obscenity with which most Australians were already familiar. For the readers in faraway England, these bowdlerised guides to Australian English were merely baffling, unless they happened to have a decent crowd of mates from that lucky country.

The first writer to break through the barriers of distance and censorship, and to provide the British with a nourishing diet of tasteless Australianisms, was Barry Humphries. This was in the Barry McKenzie cartoon strip published in the 1960s, which appeared in the British magazine *Private Eye* (Humphries & Garland 1968, 1972). Ironically, *Private Eye* was banned in Australia because of its use of crude British English. So the people of Britain had access to written and published Australian filth and crudity before the Australians themselves did. The greater severity of the Australian customs service kept Australia free from Australian humour, which largely remained an oral tradition in its country of origin.

In time, the censorship restrictions were relaxed in Australia and a new generation of humorous guides to the Australian language was produced, which left no turd unstoned. These new lexicons of Australian obscenity were published, not only in Australia itself, but also in Britain (for example Hudson & Pickering 1987; Bowles 1986) such that the full force of crude Australian humour has struck what was once called ‘the old country’. Today Barry Humphries, in his Dame Edna and Sir Les manifestations, is a big star in England as well as in Australia. And audio-cassettes of rather more basic Australian comedians, such as Kevin Bloody Wilson, are sold in motor-way service stations throughout Britain, to solace bored drivers, with material guaranteed to be “hotter than an outback barbecue” (Wilson 1994).

In fairness, it should be added that there has been an oral tradition of crude Australian jokes in Britain during most of the twentieth century (Davies 1990: 234-75). Like Australian humour itself it was a purely male and oral tradition; the jokes were ones an Englishman would exchange with his mates at work or in the pub, on sporting occasions or in the army. He would not share them with his women-folk and in theory women neither knew nor understood such jokes. A large proportion of these jokes were about the behaviour of Australian soldiers, whose view of themselves as wild larrikin was shared by their British comrades serving alongside them in both world wars (Davies 1990: 264-68). However, these British jokes (some of Australian origin) about the Australians, like crude male Australian humour itself, were neither printed nor broadcast. Consequently, Australian humour was neither recognised nor celebrated and Australian comedians’ public performances gained innocence at the expense of national distinctiveness. Only today is it possible for the British publicly to applaud and appreciate the full range of Australian vulgarity. A remarkable change has taken place; it is the purpose of this paper to describe and illuminate that change and to show how the oral tradition of crude humour, created by male Australians, entered the public sphere of publication and broadcasting and gained a new and enthusiastic audience in England.

### **Australians and British radio comedy**

It is striking to note that two of the most celebrated weekly shows of Britain’s golden age of radio comedy had Australian stars—Dick Bentley and Joy Nichols in *Take it From Here* and Bill Kerr in *Hancock’s Half Hour*. However, in neither case did the script writers make much use of the Australian identity of the three comedians. Their Australian identity was not concealed (and their previous successful stage and broadcasting careers in Australia clearly helped them to gain employment with the BBC) but neither was it emphasised. In some of their other radio and stage appearances in England, Bentley, Nichols and Kerr appeared very much as Australians but, in *Take it From Here* and *Hancock’s Half Hour*, the comic potential of their exotic identity was hardly exploited at all. The most likely reason for this is that Australians would not have been perceived as all that exotic by the British listeners, nor was there a well-established comic script (Raskin 1985) of Australianness that could be employed. Despite the jokes from both World War I and World War II about tough but undisciplined (according to English military notions of formality and hierarchy) Australian soldiers (Davies 1990: 264-68), there was no clear comic image of Australians in general. On the basis of the files in the BBC Written Archive, it seems reasonable to say that comedy producers regarded the Australian as just one more almost interchangeable type of provincial British working or lower-middle class character.

Gent: I say, old man, are you an Australian?

Stranger: No, old chap, just common. (Humphries & Garland 1988: vi)

In 1951 Ronnie Hanbury sent an idea for a new variety series called *Step Right In* to BBC's Assistant Head of Variety, in which Bill Kerr would star as a young Australian who had come to London to see the Festival of Britain. In each of the weekly programs there was to be a moment when Bill Kerr would say, "I wonder what the old folks are doing in Wagga Wagga". Bill would then also play his father back in Australia whose main, possibly stereotypical, characteristics were pessimism and a tendency to put things off. These characteristics were expressed in his two catch phrases: "be getting round to it" and "Life sure do get tedious don't it." (Kerr 1951) The BBC did not take up his suggestion and Bill Kerr, instead of becoming a much earlier radio version of Barry McKenzie, became famous as one of the main supporting characters in the radio series *Hancock's Half-Hour*. From 1954 onwards, Kerr was Hancock's inarticulate colonial cousin. One critic described the character he played as evolving from that of a "fast-talking American-type Australian", into, "a Stan Laurel type". The comparison with the Lancastrian and Hollywood comedian shows, once again, how unimportant was the Australianness of the character he played.

The idea of the Australian as a vague kind of British provincial persisted down to the early 1960s, when the BBC's John Browell wrote to Bill Kerr that he was not going to ask him to take part in a forthcoming short series with another Australian, John Bluthal. Browell wrote:

We feel we would rather have an Australian and another character as the leads instead of two Australians. For this reason we are going to replace you with, say, a Welshman or similar character. (Kerr 1953-62)

Australian simply meant familiar and British but not English; thus a Welshman would do just as well. As Barry Humphries has noted: "In this far-off epoch (1950s and early 1960s) Australians were not generally thought of as funny." (Humphries & Garland 1988)

It was, of course, Barry Humphries who created the definitive script of the comic Australian for British audiences. Dick Bentley and Bill Kerr had, as Humphries put it, "created successful music hall turns from Australian stereotypes such as the guileless bonhomie of the Australians abroad and their habits of gross in-temperance" (Humphries & Garland 1988), but this only with limited success and none in broadcasting. It was Humphries himself who was to create the first comic Australians to be widely known in Britain, notably Barry McKenzie, Sir Les Patterson, Sandy Stone, and Dame Edna Everage. That these comic characters became well-known throughout Britain, as well as Australia, is a measure of Barry Humphries' comic genius. For the first time the British had a clear and powerful image of the comic Australian.

## The genius of Barry Humphries

Barry Humphries' first distinctively Australian success in Britain was with the cartoon strip Barry McKenzie in the English magazine *Private Eye*. Ironically as previously mentioned, *Private Eye* was banned in Australia at the time because of the vulgarity of its language. (Humphries & Garland 1988: v) However, bootleg copies seem to have circulated among Barry McKenzie fans in Australia. Barry Humphries had Sir Les Patterson (who in the 1960s had 'done a stint with the Department of Customs and Excise—Literature Division') comment in 1988 that:

I'll never forget the day Barry McKenzie lobbed into my in-tray. It was a *Private Eye* publication and since *Private Eye* was banned in Australia at the time for gratuitous smut and uncalled-for lingo, I decided to take Bazza's adventures into the toilet with me for a swift perusal during my mid-morning crap. Sure enough it was Bloody disgusting and written by a long-haired Melbourne ex-pat called Brian Humphry, who was already on our blacklist for tipping the bucket on his

superlative homeland for an easy quid. Me and the lads banned it immediately and I was that angry I even rang up my brother-in-law, Brenden, in the Taxation Department and told him to give that bastard Brian Humphry buggery. (Humphries & Garland 1988)

Although the comic strip was banned in Australia by one government department, another institution, funded by the Australian government, the Film Development Corporation, put up A\$250,000 to back the film, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (Humphries 1993: 299-300). Even so, the Australian bureaucrats putting up the money were afraid that there might be, as one of them put it:

too many...er colloquialisms in the film...Barry McKenzie does get a bit on the permissive side every now and then, and the blokes upstairs...are keen that we don't do anything to ruin Australia's overseas image. (Humphries (1993: 297)

Predictably, the Australian Censor's Office gave the film its most restrictive classification and it was rubbished by pompous and apparently outraged journalists in the Australian newspapers; it was also immediately and spectacularly successful and the Australian Film Development Corporation, to its surprise and irritation, made a 500 per cent profit (Humphries 1993: 300-302).

What then was it about Barry McKenzie's language and image that so delighted the English readers of the comic strip, and the Australians who packed the cinemas to see the film, and yet so greatly offended official Australia? Barry McKenzie, like Humphries' later creation, Sir Les Patterson, was coarse and crass and forever boozing, peeing and puking; three activities he insisted on referring to explicitly and with a wealth of idiosyncratic figurative language. For some Australians it was possible to identify with McKenzie and revel in his indiscretions and freedom from a repressive niceness. For those concerned with censorship and comment, McKenzie's success was seen as an unpatriotic blow to current attempts to give Australia the sophisticated image of a country undergoing one of its periodic cultural renaissances (Humphries 1993: 251-81, see also 169). Humphries subsequently made fun of his critics by writing for the (even cruder) Sir Les Patterson a coarse parody of their objections to McKenzie as a Preface to *The Complete Barry McKenzie*:

Clued-up readers will be quick to discern in the foregoing pages a crude and anachronistic fuckin travesty of an Australia that never existed, thank Christ. This book has lost all power to hurt us or stem the tide of tourists without whom our economy would be down the gurgler. McKenzie do your worst. (Humphries & Garland 1988: v)

Humphries has captured here a striking paradox in the work of his critics. The Australia of Barry McKenzie is both an anachronism—it was like that once but is not like that today—and a travesty that never existed at all—we used to be like that but we aren't now and anyway we never were. The situation is very similar to that of Irish-Americans in the late nineteenth century in the face of the popularity of the comic stage Irishman. Working-class Irish audiences were able to enjoy his drunken escapades but the lace-curtain Irish were horrified, lest other Americans were to assume that all Irish people were like the ones represented on the stage. Similarly, some of today's Scots are ambivalent about Rab. C. Nesbit and his family in the BBC television series named after him. On the one hand, the Nesbits are funny, in a distinctly Scottish way, and it is gratifying that outsiders should appreciate their subtle comic talents. On the other hand there is an uneasiness lest these same outsiders are not merely laughing at the Nesbits but laughing at Scots in general, and that they may even think that all Scots are like Rab and his friends.

Yet there exists here a further paradox. It is only self-consciously sophisticated Australians who are likely to feel and express such fears. They are not only unable to revel in Barry McKenzie, in the manner of the ockers, who don't give a...<sup>2</sup> whether they appear sophisticated or not, but are also unable to laugh, in a truly sophisticated way, at the many layers of irony and complex mockery to be found throughout Barry Humphries' writings. In between these two large and appreciative Australian audiences lies a thin stratum of insecure people for whom a little intellect has proved to be a self-destructive thing. It is often difficult for them to attack Humphries directly as the mocker of their slender cultural achievements, so they play the political correctness card. For them, Humphries was acceptable as the comic scourge of 1950s middle-class Melbourne, but not as the new Dame Edna who makes fun of 'paupies' (paupers) and 'tinted' people.

At the centre of all the forms of uneasiness that Barry Humphries' work has induced in the chests and anaemic blood-pumps of his critics in England, as well as Australia, are questions of language. In the case of Barry McKenzie, some were upset by such crude phrases as, "one-eyed trouser snake" or, "I hope your chooks turn into emus and kick your shithouse down". And others by the use of such ethnic images as, "an Abo's armpit", or "a lubra's loin-cloth". Either way, it made them want to censor Humphrey's work and cleanse it of all words that offended against the old and new ideals of semi-educated Australia, namely 'niceness' and 'multi-culturalism'. Both forms of censorship are ways of denying that the real world doesn't exist and doesn't use its language in polite/politically correct society.

In the past such concerns resulted in the production of comic guides to Australian English that were less than fully explicit. The revolution brought about by Barry Humphries made it possible to produce a new and cruder generation of humorous introductions to the Australian language that spared neither bodily functions nor ethnic minorities. Ockers and cockles came out to play, to the delight of British as well as Australian readers.

## **A matter of language**

Let us leave Barry Humphries for the time being and look at the way these comic Australian lexicons have evolved. An important part of Australian humour and humour about Australians is based on the distinctive style, vocabulary and pronunciation of Australian English. A particular delight is taken in the ways in which it departs and differs from standard British English. In extracting humour from the English language in this way, Australians are not very different from the Welsh, the Scots, the Irish, or even the Geordies, Yorkshiremen, or Lancastrians, all of whom revel in the national or regional distinctiveness of their local dialects. Standard British English is associated with formality, hierarchy and the speech of elites, including also, in a subtle way, the speech of the members of the local elites, which is less broad and less distinctive than that of the common people in their country or region. By contrast, the use of the local demotic speech is democratic, matey, intimate and informal and thus lends itself to humour. It can be used on its own, as the language of humour, or used in contrast to the speech of them—they talk posh but we talk tidy.<sup>3</sup> Many people can speak both posh and tidy and switch between them at will, either to suit their speech to the situation, or to produce a humorous effect.

In time this spoken humour also becomes a written humour and glossaries and explanations are produced, as much to entertain the local people as to initiate strangers into its mysteries (Edwards 1985). Two such books from the pre-crude era of Australian humour are Afferbeck Lauder's *Let Stalk Strine* (1965, see also 1969) and John O'Grady's *Aussie English* (1965). O'Grady produced a further book in 1971 called *Aussie Etihet* which purports to be a guide book for Americans. So far as I know, none of these books have been published in Britain

nor America. By the standards of later humorous guides to the Australian language, they are remarkably uncrude. However, at times they allude coyly to the crudity of the Australian humour and terminology in oral circulation.

Thus, Afferbeck Lauder, Professor of Strine Studies at the University of Sinny, refers to the nursery rhyme Chair Congeal (Jack and Jill) as a rollicking old ballad that goes:

Chair congeal went up the hill  
Blank, blank, and blank with laughter, Blank, blank and blank; but blank—the Pill Congeal came tum-bling after. (Lauder 1965: 15)<sup>4</sup>

He adds:

At the request of the Strine Literary Censorship Vigilance Committee blanks have been substituted for certain passages which might have offended the sensibilities of modern Strines (Lauder 1965: 15).

A similar degree of restraint is shown by John O’Grady in his dictionary, which in the F section refers to a word as \*\*\*\*\*. As in the modern British advertisement for Castlemaine beer, which tells us that, “Australians wouldn’t give an \*\*\*\*\* for any other beer”.<sup>5</sup> He adds:

Anglo Saxon four-letter obscenities are the same wherever English is spoken. But in some countries there is more tolerance of them than there is in Australia....there are few who use them in general conversation. (O’Grady 1965: 15)

It is now clear to me that during my first visit to Australia in the early 1960s I must have met a quite unrepresentative sample of the population. Likewise, O’Grady in warning perplexed Americans visiting Australia not to root for their favourite team player, informs them, somewhat ambiguously, that the word root has a fundamental, biological, extremely vulgar application, (O’Grady 1965: 75) as in “Wouldn’t it King Farouk you?” (O’Grady 1965: 88)

Curiously, O’Grady has no advice to offer a visiting American who is in danger of innocently asking a nice Australian girl for a date while wearing a calendar coat. Equally coy is his rendering of the diatribe uttered by a small-town Australian recently returned from Canberra:

Full of orsin politicians. I’d sooner have in me nostrils the smell of in hope-they die bloody politicians...Had to drive fifteen intercoorsin miles to get a carton of milk on Sundy. (O’Grady 1965: 97)

The words bloody, bastard and bugger, are dealt with more explicitly by O’Grady and portrayed as typically Australian. Bloody is “the great Australian adjective”, bastard is “an extremely useful noun”, as valuable to Australians as “the coconut is to Polynesians” (O’Grady 1965: 20 and 13, respectively), and the noun bugger is “a substitute for bastard” (O’Grady 1965: 26) though it is not possible to tell someone to go to bastardy. Yet, none of these words were used by or in the presence of the majority of Australian people, i.e., women (O’Grady 1965: 26-40) and clergymen. Indeed, O’Grady speculated that women did not even know that the words exist (O’Grady 1965: 40).

The outline of these particular items of Australian speech and speech patterns given by O’Grady differs little from those used in working class Britain at the same period. The frequent use of a limited number of obscenities among men on their own, but never by or in front of women, produced a sex segregated pattern of speech.

In fairness to O’Grady, it should once again be stressed that the Australian censors would not have allowed him to publish anything of a more radical nature. Rather, he should be

congratulated on giving us as full an account of humorous Australian obscenity and vulgarity as was possible at the time. The humour already existed, but by the standards of the early 1960s it was not fit to print. In 1964 I attended a formal dinner organised by the students of the University of Adelaide, at which speaker after speaker told extremely funny and very filthy jokes and limericks. At the end of each episode the students banged on the table and sang, “That was a disgusting tale (or rhyme or song), tell us anotheree, dirty as buggery, tell us anotheree do”. It was a wonderful and truly Australian evening, but none of the material could have been published at the time, not even in a student magazine.

By contrast the comic guides to Australian English of the late 1980s, notably Colin Bowles’ *G’day, Teach Yourself Australian* (1986) and Bob Hudson and Larry Pickering’s *The First Australian Dictionary of Vulgarities and Obscenities* (1987), represent the full range of coarse Australisms and are published and readily available in paperback in England as well as in Australia. Thanks to the decline in censorship in both countries, the filth that formerly dared not speak its full range of names is now freely available to all. The British are now able to fully appreciate the vastly greater verbal inventiveness of their Australian cousins.

Once again, tribute must be paid to Barry Humphries, who first created a market in England for Australian verbal crudity. The key point to note is that no British publisher would ever try to market a Canadian, American, Newfoundland, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Indian, South African, Singapore or New Zealand<sup>6</sup> dictionary of vulgarities and obscenities. Only the Australian version is good enough and well-known enough to become a moderate bestseller in Britain, as well as in Australia itself, to say nothing of Singapore, where local lexicons of the distinctively crude lingo of Australian expatriates are already widely available (Aitchison & Chan 1995: 3I–3C, 73, 78, 119, 149; Aitchison & Chan 1996: 32–33, 52, 69–82). Should Australia develop closer cultural, as well as economic, ties with Asia, Australians will discover that the peoples of South East Asia already have a very thorough understanding of the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of Australians, when contrasted with the other English speaking peoples.

Many of the terms in the Hudson and Pickering dictionary were already well known to English readers from the Barry McKenzie cartoon strip, or from the performances of Sir Les Patterson (1986). This will not have lessened the Poms’ amazement at the richness of imagery, simile and metaphor in humorous Australian vulgarity. Although the words and the ideas were, in general, also available to the people in Britain, they had never been able to string them together with the kind of verbal skill that seems to come naturally to Australians. Phrases such as “pushing shit up-hill” (to attempt the impossible), “the map of Tasmania” (the female pudendum), “to yodel up the valley” (cunnilingus), “lipstick on the dipstick”, “rare as rocking horse shit”, “dry as a nun’s nasty”, “skidmarks on underwear”, “pissing in someone’s pocket” (being sycophantic), “to be up there like a rat up a drainpipe” (or pump), “to chuck a brown eye”, “a 341/2”, “I’ll owe you one” (one half of soixante-neuf) (Bowles 1986; Hudson & Pickering 1987; Blackman 1991) could all have been invented by English people, but they weren’t. They are uniquely Australian and there is nothing comparable to them in British speech or slang. Should the Poms now speak of, “pointing Percy at the porcelains”, “eating hair pie”, “making a Dutch oven”, “a power-point plate face”, or “opening your lunch” (Bowles 1986; Hudson & Pickering 1987; Blackman 1991), it will be because they have learned these terms and phrases from Australian sources.

As for Barry Humphries, the pioneer in this transfusion of life-giving-filth from the fertile Australian imagination to the staid British mind, he has assailed the “poor old Poms” for over thirty years with vulgar Australian invective—some of Australian popular origin, some an invention of his own gifted Australian brain. Either way it is equally authentically Australian. No one before Barry McKenzie had told objectionable English people (while they were safe and secure in their own home-land) to “go and stick yer head up a dead bear’s bum” or to “go



and dip your left eye in hot cocky shit". The British were amazed and delighted; they find evasions of the ta-boos on mentioning bodily functions and country matters just as funny as Australians do, but they had never seen anyone do it so creatively. In particular, Barry Humphries introduced them to an entire new vocabulary of phrases which describe vomiting as a disgusting loss of control of a bodily function and an unnatural reversal of the order of nature, that had rarely been a source of elaborate humour before in Britain. The Australians had provided the British with a new subject for their mirth and disgust, which had previously been limited to sex and scatology. Suddenly, "the sun came up like chunder, out of Oz across the sea." An understanding of this uniquely Australian phenomenon (the humour of vomit) provides insights, both into the art of Barry Humphries and into the nature of Australian culture. First though, let us look at the way in which the Poms themselves are the satirical, as well as the physical, victims of unrestrained Australian chundering.

### **Barry McKenzie is sick**

Through the cartoon strip Barry McKenzie, Barry Humphries was able to introduce British readers to the distinctively Australian comic possibilities of someone being sick. An act that occurred often, though not inevitably, after a bout of excessive drinking, and an activity also associated with inebriation and incontinence: a loss of control all round. In particular, chundering was celebrated in Barry McKenzie's legendary drinking song, *The Old Pacific Sea* (Humphries 1993: 274). Other country's drinking songs may celebrate the elation, exuberance, intoxication and even the violence, induced by alcohol—I belong to Glasgow, Beer from the Colliers Arms, etc. However, Australia alone possesses a song that revels in the vomiting aftermath of indulgence. As the song says:

You can either park a Tiger  
Or chunder in the Old Pacific From the-summit of the Eiger Sea.  
I've had liquid laughs in bars  
And I've hurled from moving cars  
And I've chucked when and where it suited me.  
But, if I could choose a spot  
To regurgitate me lot  
Then I'd chunder in the old Pacific Sea (Humphries 1993: 275)<sup>7</sup>

A large part of Barry McKenzie's adventures in England consists of the hero being violently sick over a Pom, who is thinking or talking nonsense at the time. The vomit of shapeless, formless regurgitated food by the very basic Australian hero is thus a metaphor of, as well as a response to, the nonsensical babble of word-garbage uttered by the English chatter-regurgitating classes. A good example of this occurs when the trendy BBC television producer, Dominic Fry, invites Barry McKenzie to chunder in front of the cameras. McKenzie unwisely mixes amphetamines with alcohol beforehand and instead takes off his trousers and flashes his "nasty", his "old mutton dagger", on screen (Humphries & Garland 1988: 39-40). Dominic Fry is delighted at this television break-through and offers Bazza a series, but the by now nauseous and embarrassed Barry McKenzie is sick all over him.

The television producer is last seen running away from McKenzie gibbering:

I think I'm going mad—hear no evil—see no evil—smell no evil you've chundered on me for the last time...out out dammed spot will the multitudinous seas incarnadine...he took water and washed his hands...Aghh?!...my soul is white but oh my suit is orange. Omo washes whiter—clean—clean—white—pure white! Wings winging" (Humphries & Garland 1988: 40).

In this speech the familiar words of Lady Macbeth and Pontius Pilate, from Shakespeare and the Bible (which every English person is expected to take with them to a desert island), dissolve into an advertising slogan which in turn fragments into pretentious idiocy. This destruction of language and meaning is particularly appropriate, coming from a television producer who has just been chundered on. Television reverses the process by which complex thoughts and speech are constructed. It does this by linking together words and phrases in exactly the same way that vomiting reverses the normally one-way process, by which what we eat becomes what we are. Eating is order, puking is disorder. The media is the mess age. Attempts at communication by soundbytes is the equivalent of divination by the examination of puked-up sweetcorn and tomato skins.

At an earlier time during his stay in England, Barry McKenzie was confined in a straight-jacket in a British lunatic asylum. While trapped in this helpless position, he is forced to listen to a tirade of nonsensical psycho-babble from the British psychiatrist, Dr. Meyer de Humphries, someone who ascribes McKenzie's difficulties in adapting to the mother country—Britain—to problems stemming from his relationship with his own mother—the usual Freudian codswallop. There is only one form of aggression open to a nauseous man trussed up in a straight-jacket. Bazza threatens Dr Meyer de Humphries that he will “chunder on his wall to wall”, “throw the voice”, “play the hole”, “laugh at the ground” (Humphries & Garland 1988: 26). However, the wretched Pommy psychiatrist expert, entrenched as he is in the piffling intellectual jargon of psycho-analysis, cannot understand good plain Australian English and Barry McKenzie is able to be sick all over his head shouting, “cop that you Pommy bastard” (Humphries & Garland 1988: 26).

Many pukes later, Barry McKenzie finds himself in another sick-making environment, the cross-Channel ferry from England to France, where he is sick over the rail on the upper deck of the ship and forgets to shout “watch under” (chunder). Below, a nice old English lady is talking nonsense to her pet dog—the kind of baby talk that possibly makes sense to an infant but is certainly beyond the capacity of a toy dog with a brain the size of a walnut to understand. We also learn that she is, in some way or another, evading the health rules, designed to stop the spread of what she calls, for the benefit of her dog, “those horrid rabie-wabies”. Once again an English speaker of nonsense is silenced by forthright Australian materialism—the mind's the brine<sup>8</sup>—for Barry McKenzie entombs (the) nice old lady and her dog in tepid chuck. (Humphries & Garland 1988: 80).

Barry McKenzie now returns to the dog and his vomit and says meditatively to his Frenchified Australian friend, Col the Frog, “Isn't it funny when you come to think of it? A bastard tucks away a few jars of ice cold, it's only in his Ned Kelly for a few jiffs and then when he has a decent hurl, it comes out all thick and different somehow”. At this point the old lady herself becomes nauseous, as a result of McKenzie's analysis of his own vomit and leans over the side of the ship to be sick. Barry McKenzie comments, “Go on lady, play the whale, but I'll bet you a greenie it won't look nothing like what you had-for lunch” (Humphries & Garland 1988: 80).

At this point it becomes clear that although the typically Australian McKenzie is indifferent to the dis-gusting quality of vomit and vomiting, he nonetheless understands precisely why it arouses such disgust among upper-middle class English people, who are revolted by the sight of its formlessness. Only that which has form, i.e., food, the human body, the sacred bread and wine of Communion that is the body and blood of Christ, can be respected and revered (Davies 1990: 303-306). Vomit is the opposite of this, akin to the formless soggy sop that was given to Judas as a symbol of chaos and confusion (Davies 1990: 304).<sup>9</sup> Likewise, vomiting puts into reverse the necessary and at times sacred acts of eating and drinking. Indeed, the ancient Roman practice of eating and drinking an elaborate meal, and then deliberately inducing vomiting in order to be able immediately to enjoy a second banquet, has been

condemned as a form of unnatural vice. It is perhaps appropriate that the English people puked on by Barry McKenzie are all, in one form or another, mental masturbators living in an unreal world. However, it is also clear that Barry McKenzie's incessant thundering is a satire on Australian, as well as British culture.

## **The Dada origins of Barry McKenzie**

Long before Barry McKenzie came to puke on the Poms, his inventor, Barry Humphries, had exploited the revolting properties of sick in both humorous and artistic contexts. Humphries writes in his autobiography of two such escapades, during his time as a student at Melbourne University in the 1950s:

The firm of HJ Heinz had an excellent product called Russian Salad. It consisted largely of diced potato in mayonnaise with a few peas and carrot chips. Surreptitiously spilt and splashed in large quantities on the pavement of a city block, it closely resembled human vomit. It was a simple and delightful recreation of mine to approach a recent deposit of salad in the guise, once again, of a tramp. Disgusted pedestrians were already giving it a very wide berth, holding their breaths and looking away with watering eyes. Not 1, as I knelt beside one of the larger puddles, curdled and carrot-flecked. Drawing a spoon from my top pocket I devoured several mouthfuls, noticing out of the corner of my eye, and with some satisfaction, several people actually being sick at the spectacle.

Even more entertaining by far were the two Dada exhibitions held in the Women Graduates' Lounge in the old Union building, and our lunchtime revue, *Call Me Madman?* These are the highlights of my short University career. The 'art' exhibitions occurred on consecutive years but have merged in my memory. One of the most notorious exhibits consisted of a large tub filled with old books, one about Cezanne and another called *The Book of Beauty*. Over these volumes a large industrial-sized can of Heinz Russian Salad had been poured. By consulting their catalogues, curious art lovers could discover that this exhibit bore the title, was reading these books when I felt sick' (Humphries (1993: 118-119).

The most interesting, amusing and—for Humphries' indignant critics—unimaginable aspect of Humphries' Dada experiments is that their author was far more cultured, talented and artistically sensitive, than the people he was making fun of. Only a clever person can play the fool with skill and only one who understands and appreciates art can desecrate it successfully. Art and anti-art are both the opposites of mediocrity.

The same point can be made in relation to the creation of Sir Les Patterson. It takes more skill to create a figure of such crudity, than to be refined. There is more art in Sir Les' coarse and chauvinistic outbursts than in the subsidised-by-bureaucratic-category productions that are sponsored by Sir Les' real-world counterparts. At least he did not have to pretend to be Ukrainian. Sir Les is an artistic creation, in the same sense that a wandering antinomian Yogi (Singh Uberoi 1967: 89-100) is regarded as a saint in parts of India.

## **Chundering and the Australian condition**

Barry Humphries could not have made use of the comic potential of vomiting as successfully as he did had it not already been an important theme in the life of Australia—a fact that is demonstrated by the enormous number of ways in which vomit is described and celebrated in Australian English. Only a few of these were invented by Barry Humphries. Most of his terminology is an adaptation or embellishment of everyday Australian phrases. No other

version of English can compete with the vast vocabulary of words and phrases that is available to an Australian who wishes to describe vomiting in a crude, comic or colourful way.

In addition to the illustrations of this cited earlier, there are many more distinctively Australian turns of phrase on this theme: “the technicolour yawn”, “the big spit”, “to kneel down by the big white telephone”, “the yellow tornado”, “driving the porcelain bus”, “cry ruth”, “make love to the lay”, “to heave”... (see Blackman 1991; Bowles 1986; Hudson & Pickering 1987; Humphries & Garland 1988).

In order to understand the Australian comic fascination with vomit, it is necessary to refer to that most distinctive and typical of all traditional Australian social forms—the loose, egalitarian, unstructured, all-male groups of leisure and drinking companions, where the ideals of mateship (Oxley 1978) flourish, and the Australian ethic of ‘fraternal anarchy’ (Conway 1974: 77) reigns supreme. Such groups exist in most countries but became a more important part of social life in Australia than elsewhere. Firstly, this was because of the shortage of women in Australia during much of the nineteenth century, especially in the rural areas (Conway 1974: 29). Secondly, it was because of the Australian repudiation of the social stratification which was so marked in Britain, the country from which most of the early Australian settlers came. The absence of the civilising influence of women, and of any wish to ape the gentility of the upper and upper-middle classes, meant that crudity and coarseness could be good humouredly celebrated in both behaviour and language. Equality within the group and the absence of class boundaries were displayed in patterns of drinking, where each man had ‘his shout’. The purchaser thus demonstrated his equality with all those who drank with him. In such a society, the obsession with self-control and the symbolic concern with body-boundaries that characterise elite groups in a hierarchical society were absent, and drunkenness and public vomiting became a source of amusement, rather than shame.

Where there is no concern to preserve class boundaries, there is no concern with body boundaries either, and chundering is comically acceptable, its comic quality being enhanced by the offence it gives to those outside of or excluded from the group. Women, wowsers and the class-ridden English, all of whom represent moral restraint and a concern with respectability and the niceties of social status, are excluded. Freedom and puking gang together: “Take off your dram”.

In practice, Australia is stratified in much the same way as other democratic capitalist societies (Davis and Encel 1965). Urban life in Sydney or Melbourne is not very different from that of Bristol or Toronto. What differs is the myth of the past, a myth that may still be lived in remote small towns, a myth that does not in any sense describe the average Australian—half of whom will now be women anyway—but which does identify the ideal typical Australian, a representation in whom all the tiny ways in which Australians may be distinctive are pushed to a logical extreme. In that mythical world, one man is being sick and another is laughing in a mutual celebration of equality and masculinity.

Far away in England a diversity of people is now aware of the comic possibilities of this primal scene, thanks to the efforts of Australia's own humourists. Whether a particular English audience is laughing with, or at, the Australian participants depends not on whether they are sympathetic or disdainful towards Australia, but on the position they occupy in their own local social order and their perception of their own society. When the English laugh about Australians, they are laughing about themselves.

## **Note**

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<sup>2</sup> This phrase is now used to advertise Australian beer in England on British commercial television. Australian breweries now exploit the Barry McKenzie image to sell beer abroad but Barry Humphries has not received so much as a free crate of lager from them. In the hey-day of the Barry McKenzie cartoon strips and films the breweries were trying to move up-market and to make beer look sophisticated, so that they had no time for Barry McKenzie. More fool them. See Humphries & Garland (1988: x and 11).

<sup>3</sup> To talk tidy means to speak English correctly, the term itself also being drawn from the English dialect spoken in (old) South Wales, popularly known as English (Welsh English). See J. Edwards (1985).

<sup>4</sup> For a different version see Blackman (1991: 74).

<sup>5</sup> See note 2.

<sup>6</sup> There is remarkably little crudity in the Australian lexicon of New Zealand speech: Buzo (1994). Buzo makes Kiwese sound like Australian spoken with a Belfast accent.

<sup>7</sup> See also Humphries & Garland (1988: 21).

<sup>8</sup> Australian philosophers tend to be the main followers of the Leeds' (England) philosopher UT Place's materialist theory of the nature of mind. Hence it is known in England as 'the mind's the brine thesis'.

<sup>9</sup> See also John 13: 26–27, The Bible (King James' Version).

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