

Weird Adelaide

BARBARA HANRAHAN

IN ADELAIDE, anybody can pump out at you and cut you up and put you in a glad bag . . . A kid goes to the loo and disappears — in such a quiet little place, so many folks disappear . . . They say there are more topless waitresses in Adelaide for its size than any other city in the world . . . Adelaide is a lovely place to bring up a family . . . It's full of pickled Old Girls who still put on their best clothes for going to town . . . The open inspection syndrome at weekends . . . Adelaide water is so bad it's like snake piss . . . If you're not one of the Old Adelaide Families you're not an OAF . . . Adelaide is Asthma City — if anybody has a bright idea people clutch their throats and gasp in anguish . . . Adelaide's going — they're knocking the guts out of the place and putting up a new city . . .

EVERYONE has their own feelings about Adelaide, and they tend to be extreme. It's either Garden City of the South (where flourish the arts and sciences, and all those things which spell the culture of twentieth-century civilization), or that ideal setting for a horror movie of Salman Rushdie's infamous *Tatler* piece (exorcisms, omens, shinings, poltergeists, things that go bump in the night). The Paradise version features the stock ingredients of well-watered plain, enchanted Hills, girdle of green, white-sand beaches, wattle-bird says goodnight, sun draws his curtains. There are countless bit-players in Amityville-Adelaide. The most prominent seem to be an elegant maiden aunt; all sex-kicks-violence beneath her prim Edwardian exterior; and an innocent in Harrison school shoes, his little-boy image lynched by a tight collar, masochistically running marathons for pleasure. *Weird Adelaide*. The clichés and contradictions were there at its beginnings: Edward Gibbon Wakefield dreaming up his new England beyond the seas, free of the taint of convictism, as he languished in Newgate Prison to expiate an abduction and Gretna Green marriage with a schoolgirl heiress.

William IV had a pineapple-shaped head and a German consort whose Honiton lace robe was wreathed round the hem with Amaranth, Daphne, Eglantine, Lilac, Auricula, Ivy, Dahlia, and Eglantine again — the initial letters forming her name, Adelaide. She was a noble, sincere, Christian lady, generous and forgiving, who did nothing after dinner but embroider flowers. She introduced Christmas trees to England, and wouldn't let the ladies come to ~~parties~~ her parties, and carried a statue of her dead baby, little Princess Bess, wherever she went. It was the King's desire that the new colony's capital should be named after her.

And so they came in the *Duadem*, the *Duamless*, the *Royal Admiral* . . .

Abbott, Adams, Adamson, Addison . . . Little Britain across the world, their Pioneer faces stare out from Duryea's photos. Daunting in their respectability. Moderation the keynote. Idlers and drunkards unwanted. The Church, Established and Dissenting. Anglicanism the faith of the social elite; a conforming Nonconformism for the majority. Teetotal, God for Sunday, hanky up your sleeve. *Sinners, whither would you wander? Whither would you stray? Oh, remember, life is slender. 'Tis but a short day.* Steady and sober and utterly extraordinary. How is it that such ordinariness took a leap in the dark to *terra incognita*?

Yet it was pretty to see the trees covered with bunches of yellow blossom, and when the wind blew off the land, the air was so filled with wattle perfume they smelt it on board the ship. Black cockatoos; white cockatoos, yellow- and orange- and pink-crested; parrots and parakeets and black swans flying. They looked at the new place with their Old Country eyes and saw it as a gentleman's park, a nobleman's park, an English park. Once Adelaide had been Tarradakanya. Now there was a Native Location, and an official Native should worship Jehovah rather than a red kangaroo; and for Governor Gawler's Native Reception be decorously clad in blue dungarees or a red flannel dress. A Native was a plaything, a curio, a grown-up child who begged for bicketty and bappy and was regaled with roast beef, sugar, tea, rice and biscuits for the Queen's birthday feast.

It was only 1838, and the workmen were still on the roof of Trinity church, but for Baby Fisher's christening the ladies wore maroon silk, fawn silk, lemon silk, violet silk, pale green silk, stiff corded black silk; and there were lace pelerines, pearl necklaces, crepe scarves, cherry ribbons, sable boas. The year before, pickled Hottentot fig leaves and samphire gathered at Glenelg had been a delicacy. After the ceremony they walked to Mr Fisher's and partook of an elegant cold collation: giblet and gravy soup, roast sucking pig, fowls — roast and boiled, tongue, chicken pies, plum pudding, gooseberry pie, scalded codlings, damson pie, preserved ginger, tippy cake, custard and pear tart, preserved orange, plum cake, port, sherry, ale and cheese. Then the ladies walked in the garden and came inside again to dance the *Coquette*.

There were giant white gum trees, then, along the banks of the Torrens, and up the slopes of Montefiore Hill. Robert Gouger, the first Colonial Secretary, cut some of them down when he built his house on Strangways Terrace to get a glimpse from his balcony of Government House. Osmond Gilles' residence in the foothills, where Beaumont now stands, was staffed with coolie servants from India. Brides were married in Chinese

silk with orange-blossom bouquets. Mrs Gawler wrote home for gauze cap ribbons and silk mitts.

But the climate was not to be depended on. When the hot winds blew, it was like putting your face to the mouth of a baker's oven. In summer, the country round about appeared nothing but a sandhill. Adelaide swarmed with fleas and flies; the Hills had a dried-up appearance. The place was quite civilized, with nothing rough or outlandish, and all its right-angled streets and squares named after leading founders, promoters and settlers. Yet the light was so strange. Everything looked small, and the colours oddly bright; you could hardly believe things to be real. It was like looking at a toy town, set about with figures from a Noah's ark. You were not accustomed to see things so distinctly, at such a distance.

THERE WAS a time when South Australia was a land ruled by women. In the gold-rush days it could seem that only they and children were in existence. All at once it was an old world sentiment that men must work and women weep. They escaped the parlour to gather the entire vintage of a year and make its wine; they ploughed and sowed and scattered corn from a seed-slip slung across their shoulders. And as those heady days receded, the women of Hahndorf kept tramping down, year after year, to market in Adelaide.

South Australian women were the first in Australia to gain the right to vote, but in the centenary year of 1936, E.H. McEllister of Dulwich could argue, confident of support, in a letter to the Editor of *The Advertiser*: 'The sexes were ordained in such a way that the man is the bread-winner, and the woman the builder of the home. Any frustration of this principle and we would merely become a race of neuters! The only way to accomplish equality among humans is to abolish the sexes — and very soon equality and the humans would be abolished, too. Great minds, personified in Hitler and Mussolini, are leading the world back to sanity in regard to the correct position and employment of the sexes. In Spain today "equality" has reached such a state that women are fighting in the war alongside the men! What a disgrace to true womanhood and motherhood! Let women look to the Mother of our Lord for an example.

Would you, too, like to mould your skinny body, bony arms and legs into alluring, pleasing shapeliness? Or do you belong to that group of women whose figures are of the Abdomen Type? It's either Madame Irene shell-pink corsets or art silk scanties, and all the time your smile should be a pleasant memory (say Kolynos). You marry in moderation, have children in moderation, die in moderation. Scene trays, cake dishes, pillow-shams, doilies,

Horsis is a stylish Restaurant
People are encouraged to linger over a small meal or even just coffee, which is

tea-cosies, blue-beaded milk-jug covers, English china tea-sets with artistic pink rose sprays. The weirdness of suburbia becomes weirder when it's set in an exotic landscape. Bearded bottlebrush, woolly tea-tree, spider orchid, bidgeewidge. The gum trees rising up, tier upon tier; freaked-out blue of the sky. But at night, five stars in the form of the Saviour's cross.

After the War there were space dogs and sputniks in that sky, and an American moon circled the earth. But Adelaide kept being the cleanest and neatest capital city in Australia, the nicest place in the world. Though it was populate, or perish, the Migration Minister, Mr Calve, had said an average of seven children a family and Australia's future would never be in doubt, but they kept bringing in New Australians. It was unnatural. Adelaide, with its harbour many miles away, very seldom saw foreign ships, like its sister States. Adelaideans were not accustomed to seeing foreign people in their midst. Suddenly, from nowhere, thousands had come, and a mixture of races was alarming, and lots of them were not a suitable type. They talked to each other in their own tongues instead of English; they shared a taste for Continental foods; they preferred wine to beer; they thought a fine leg was just something that looked nice in nylon. And life was no bed of roses in England now, but even the Pommy migrants were complaining. Could you go into your back garden in Britain and pick a peach, apricot or orange from a tree? They came here expecting the world to be dropped in their laps, and the milk and stout to flow down their throats. And the streets were unsafe for young girls. The big problem was what was to become of South Australia's 24,000 surplus bachelors. It should be arranged for every girl to have two husbands.

And so on to the sixties and the seventies and Adelaide starts seeming like somewhere else. The Dunstan Decade, and the State is setting a pattern for Australia. Aboriginal land rights, equal opportunities legislation, the easing of licensing laws and dress codes, homosexual and abortion reforms. Trendy South Australia is the first place in Australia where you can swim nude and still be perfectly legal. For some who see Adelaide sinister, this is where it begins. . . . If God saw it was necessary to put clothes on Adam and Eve after they had sinned against His command, why do people think they are doing no wrong by exposing their naked bodies in public?

Ruščić's Adelaide in 1984 was a city of arson and vanishing children and awful murder. 'Oh, that someone could be so stupid,' said the then Lord Mayor, Mrs Chapman. That such a person should have been in the depths

of depression when visiting our beautiful city is probably a reason why he should not come back.' The Premier, Mr Bannon, said that statistics showed Adelaide did not have a higher rate of 'horrible crimes' than other Australian States.

Yet when the baby animals were slaughtered at the Zoo it seemed a particularly Adelaide crime. The city is so clean, so pretty, and so much — despite the cranes on its skyline — the big country town it takes pride in being, that it seems, paradoxically, to suit the more kinky varieties of evil. Even in the daytime the streets of classy North Adelaide and Unley Park can be tunnels, enclosed by green leaves. And so quiet, so secretive; all the people shut away behind their high walls. And the Torrens, with its levelled and lawn-planted banks and picture-postcard University Bridge, has had a sinister flavour for years. For so many lost girls of the past in a certain state (which meant an indisposition of several months' standing), those river banks were the place to jump from. And if you did it in a properly weird Adelaide way, you left a confused medley of Scripture texts behind you.

At night, Adelaide turns *filin noir*, becomes a miniature: Cornell Woolrich city, its empty side streets black and creepy, with a feel of the back lot at Paramount or Universal. The twin towers of the Town Hall and Post Office loom up; the old Queen and her stay-at-home explorers are out in Victoria Square. It's just the setting for midnight chimes heralding in some Dawn of the Living Dead. The neon glitter of Hindley Street takes on a curious excitement, edged by so much gloom. To be there on a Saturday night is like walking some fifties boardwalk. There's a tacky fairground atmosphere. The on-off lights blink their acid-drop colours. The Saturday night pick-ups keep parading. Sandra Dee and Natalie Wood on wobbly high heels; Jimmy Dean and Sal Mingo cruising in their customised Valiants and Holdens. The Monkey Man rolls his shoulders outside the Flash; the kids play the machines in Downtown and Timezone.

Weird Adelaide. The Spooner girls in their silver-spoon private-school uniforms, just the right degree of wrinkle in their socks, outside Sportsgirl in Rundle Mall. The frog cakes on their paper doilies in Balfours; the naughty R rated moulds under the counter (ASK ASSISTANT) in the cake shop in Adelaide Arcade. K.G. on his 5DN sports show throwing the lines open on Martina and Judy; and it might still be the thirties as the unchanging Adelaide voices come ringing in: *Disgusting . . . Filthy . . . It makes me want to vomit . . . They ought to be gassed . . .*

But weirdness can have a distinctive beauty.

You climb the stairs in the Museum, past the Daughter of Rameses, to the Egyptian Room. Khafra, the Lord of Crowns, guards the door on his lion throne; the mummy man lies shrouded in rusty-red, marked with mysterious stains. And there's the mummified cat, the mummified fish, the mummified hawk, the awful black mummified hand and head. Art Deco lino on the floor; glass cases edged in glossy bottle-green — it's a fantasy Egypt, a perfect place.

The D'Auvergne Boxall Room at the Art Gallery is ranged with heroines: Daphne, Susanna, Queen Esther, the Finder of Moses, the Song-of-the-Shirt Seamstress — all done in marble. And, in glistening High Romance oil-paint, there are more of them: Forgiven, in her poppy-flower dress; Juliet, feigning death; Circe, 1890s vamp; Destiny, A Nymph, The Foam Sprite. And Holman Hunt's risen Christ flings off his bandages in a rainbow haze; while across the gallery He poses dewy-fresh, as Bouguereau's adorable Child.

Glimmers of blue glass are mixed up with the tidy jungle of the Botanic Garden's Tropical House. A midget Crystal Palace, it crowns a moon garden of aloe and agave and cactuses like giant penises and tea-cosies and bunny ears. The sacred lotus-leaf forest rises up about the bronze boy riding his swan; the wisteria arbour vaults you in green-glass shade. In the Rose Garden, bordered by Words of Love irises, ladies under sunshades make a slow, sniffing promenade. Sweet Repose, Angel Wings, Pink Chiffon, Hawaiian Sunset — the names of the Hybrid Teas sound like a roll-call of Elvis' greatest hits.

And there's the Beehive Corner with its beehive, West's Coffee Palace in Hindley Street, the East End Market, the West Terrace Cemetery, the Grand Postal Hall of the GPO and the Mortlock Library, both meticulously restored; the hotels: Botanic, Stag, Brecknock, Austral, Colonel Light . . . and so much more.


IN THE Maritime Museum at Port Adelaide, one of the most fascinating exhibits is the small treasure trove of objects retrieved from the sea beneath the Glenelg Jetty. Sovereigns and half-crowns; crescent moon and wishbone

brooches; lockets and bracelets; opal and ruby and lucky-horseshoe rings, and LUCY spelt out on a gold ring. Suddenly the Victorian and Edwardian photo figures take on reality. She was a girl who wore LUCY on her finger, and walked the streets of the city that's ours today.

Lost Adelaide. In his marvellous, heart-breaking book of that name, Michael Burden catalogues so much of our heritage that's been destroyed. It's still happening in Adelaide proper, and in its suburbs. In 1973 I walked about the streets of Thebarton and Mile End, photographing those bits of the past I thought were beautiful: the Rosella Sauce parakeet on a grocery wall, Hardy's grand house with its lacework trim on the corner of Dew Street and the lane, tiny houses the Pioneers might have come out of in George Street, the old gasometer on the corner of Maria Street; Moran's Corner and Hook the bootmaker's and the Daisy Dell milkbar on the Beach Road . . . The Thebarton Primary School was being pulled down even then, and now everything on that list, and so many other buildings have gone, too. It's happening everywhere; particularly if the suburb is still working-class and untrendy.

Weird Adelaide. Generations and generations of working-class people, quite disappeared. No official bronze plaques on pavements for them. You only find them in the commonplace objects they left behind; and in sepia photographs and yellowing newspapers and old people's reminiscences. Folk heroes who are Adelaide, not some slick imitation of Anywhere. Not official worthies or the souffe and shoulder-pads set, but people like Sticky Davis, friend of countless schoolchildren, who sold big round toffees flecked with flaked coconut, and the milk rock that was Hindmarsh rock from his shop on the Port Road. Or Sammy Lunn, popular patriotic worker, who regularly sang and danced on cinema steps to collect money for First War soldiers.

What we want now in Adelaide are writers and artists who work from the heart of those commonplace suburban streets, who recognise the weirdness of the ordinary, who record it before the version of it we have now, is swept away. We want passion and intensity, an art that comes from places like Port Adelaide and Thebarton and Holden Hill; that stays unofficially weird.




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