

*Saturday 31st of October 2009*

## **On the road to Gundagai**

One of the saddest things about two middle-aged dads on a road trip is the fact they feel the need to point out "big yellow diggers" to each other.

I drove\* from Canberra to Deniliquin, NSW, to attend the world-famous Ute Muster with my mate Chris\*\*, and every time we saw roadworks we had to struggle not to squeal, because we both have small sons who love cement mixers, rollers and trucks. We made a pact to ignore all mechanical attractions, but outside Wagga Wagga I couldn't help drawing Chris's attention to the planes outside the RAAF Museum, or crying out, "Look! McDonald's has got a playground!"

Before we got to Wagga, we were on the road to Gundagai and, as every schoolkid knows, New York has its Statue of Liberty, Paris has its Hilton, Ballina has its Big Prawn\*\*\* and Gundagai has its Dog on the Tuckerbox.

It's hard to imagine what goes through the minds of overseas visitors who make a special detour to see the Dog on the Tuckerbox (except, "Oh, it's a dog, and it's on a ... box") but you can't blame the Gundaguyanans\*\*\*\* for building something to lure passing motorists to stop.

There's not much on the road from Gundagai to Narrandera, so Chris and I were excited\*\*\*\*\* to see a sign pointing to "Historic Lockhart, the Veranda Town".

Every Australian's heart swells with pride when he or she sees a veranda. "You don't get those anywhere else," they boast, erroneously.

We turned off the highway and immediately found neat streets of homes with decks, awnings and patios, until finally we came across a 1960s-style redbrick house girt by a veranda. "But it's not something you'd name a town after, is it?" said Chris. "There aren't many verandas at all."

I was oddly moved by his disappointment. "Perhaps the sign is aspirational," I suggested - which is more than you could say for the marker that pointed to another local attraction, known simply as "The Rock".

In fact, we hadn't found Lockhart. The actual veranda town was 40 kilometres from the turn-off, so we decided not to investigate further or it would be dark by the time we reached Deniliquin.

On the noticeboard at the servo near Narrandera was a flyer for Australia First, highlighting the extreme-right-wing party's little-known policies on the trucking industry (nationalise freeways, abolish tolls, get rid of speed cameras). The servo had a strange selection of books for sale, most of which fell into one of three categories: (1) pornography dressed up as sex manuals; (2) self-published histories of bushrangers; and (3) "identification and valuation guides" to old tools, demijohns and "Australian Milk and Cream Bottles and Dairy Related Items". Chris was particularly taken with Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving, which is why I was especially pleased when we arrived in Deniliquin to find he had booked us into a motel room with a single, queen-sized bed.

The helpful owners of the Riverview Motel quickly carried an extra bunk into the room, and Chris and I repaired to the restaurant, where we were surprised to see the crew of 60 Minutes, including presenter Charles Wooley. We watched them for a while, and it was just like seeing 60 Minutes on a giant screen in 10 years' time, since Charles looked older than he does on TV and the food in the Riverview is a decade

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ahead of most country motels. The romantic glow of a candle under Chris's chin did nothing to make him more attractive to me, and he'd be lucky to even get sex for one, despite his queen-sized deception.

For me, however, the saddest part of the road trip was Chris's belated admission that there was an airport in Deniliquin, and there had been no point in my flying to Canberra, then driving for six hours - except that Chris lives in Canberra and he gets airsick on small planes.

\* I didn't actually drive, obviously, since I can't.

\*\* Not Chris Ryan.

\*\*\* But for how much longer?

\*\*\*\* Or "Gundeguy's".

\*\*\*\*\* Comparatively speaking.

*Saturday 24th of October 2009*

## **Writing and 'rithmetic**

It's a numbers game. there were more than 70 guests at the launch of my first novel, King of the Cross, at Macleay Bookshop in Sydney's Potts Point, but only one Chris Ryan. I sold 42 copies of the new book, including six to the poor bloke who accidentally spilled a glass of red wine over them. Chris Ryan refused to sign one of my books, presumably on the grounds that he didn't write it\*. Jeremy Chunn, on the other hand, did sign one of my books, on what grounds I don't know.

One living bloke with the surname "Sutton" was alarmed that my book was dedicated to "Mr Sutton RIP". I thanked four people in the acknowledgements, and only misspelled the name of one of them.

None of my four Facebook friends turned out to be mad, and one of them gave me one of three presents I received: a limited-edition Reg Mombassa ACTU T-shirt. (The other gifts were a bottle of white wine and some fluffy toys for the kids.) Only one guest at the launch turned out to be a junkie; with four scabs on his face and seven on his arms, he had wandered in off the street when he saw people drinking free beer. My friends - and the junkie - drank six bottles of white wine and seven or eight reds and 48 beers, although one mate also BYOd an extra dozen beers in case of drought. Jack Marx gave one brilliant speech including 10 good jokes with one unifying theme: that I owe my inspiration and success to Jack Marx. I mumbled one incoherent address, during which I forgot to thank two important people, my agent and my editor. I did, however, unaccountably thank one mate, Pat, who had nothing to do with the book.

When the formal launch was over, a party of 15 guests proceeded to the Swans Club, where my publisher shouted them \$350 of alcohol. Only \$24 was accounted for by Chris Ryan's attempt to prove that he could carry four large glasses of beer at the same time, in a complicated, catering-style, two-tier hold. He could, but only for about 0.45 of a second, before all four glasses crashed over the floor, the bar and me. Chris Ryan sliced open one of his fingers on the broken glass.

One person fell off a four-legged chair from a stable, seated position, which is something I had never seen happen before. One bouncer attempted to get us to leave the bar twice, but was thwarted by my mate who was 1.5 times his size.

When I knocked over one glass of wine, I realised it was time for my girlfriend Claire and me to get something to eat and go home. We left the club and Claire bought one pie, but then we forgot what we were doing and went to another pub instead. It was about 12 midnight when we got there, and the doorman asked how much I'd had to drink.

"I've been to a book launch," I said, "and I wrote the book."

Surprisingly, this seemed to be the correct response and he let us in, although we only stayed for one drink. I ate six slices of bread and butter at home instead of buying one kebab in Kings Cross, and felt 100 times better for it in the morning.

I received four unusual excuses from friends who couldn't turn up to the launch, including "death of a child's first pet", "went to the wrong bookshop", "caught a disease from a patient" and "genuine migraine".

One of those people came anyway.

It was the only one of the four parties I have given in my life that anyone has ever said

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they enjoyed, and the only one where men were outnumbered by women.

\*Although the bookshop did keep stocks of the works of his immeasurably more successful ex-SAS namesake.

*Saturday 03rd of October 2009*

## **Time Wounds all Heels**

Along with every other self-satisfied media wanker, I've been enjoying *Mad Men*, the TV drama about life in a Madison Avenue advertising agency in the early 1960s, when adults smoked in the lift and drank whisky in the office; children played with plastic bags on their heads (although, presumably, not for long); and a father could slap another's son without anybody even writing a book about it.

I don't know if it really was like that in the days of side-partings and pointy bras, but I'm still happily suckered into sniggering along at the ignorance, bigotry, blind consumerism and ferocious disregard for health and safety that fills the air at Sterling Cooper like second-hand smoke.

*Mad Men* is a smart show, but its significance lies not in what it tells us about the recent past (i.e., people weren't as good and clever and aware as they are now) but in what it says about the present (i.e., a lot of our concerns, prejudices, beliefs and leisure shirts are going to look pretty stupid in 50 years' time).

It'd be nice to think I'd live until 2050 to see a series about an advertising agency in North Sydney in the early noughties. Am I the only one who recalls the curious fashion among media executives to wear their ties slung over their shoulders, as if they'd got dressed in front of a very powerful fan? Or the fact that ad guys used to open their twist-tops on their trouser cuffs, to avoid getting rust marks on their shirts? Or the way all the men wore earrings, and then one day none of them did?

It's a fair bet that fauxhawks might seem a bit pitiful midway through the century, and that a few grown-up "creatives" are going to regret those highly visible tattoos. I doubt if the messenger bag is going to come out well in any future fashion audit, and the sight of Crocs on an off-duty art director probably won't inspire a noughties style revival. And, in years to come, it could appear odd that wealthy professionals were prepared to pay extra to buy jeans that were pre-ripped, patched and faded, and furniture with the paint already peeled off.

As for social attitudes, future generations (assuming there are any) may wonder at our conviction that, at a time when there is virtually no superpower conflict, we are at the end of the world; the debate over GM foods will be settled one way or the other, and the people on the wrong side aren't going to seem too clever; and it might well be that people no longer spend half their leisure time trying to decide which new phone to buy. "Facebooking" will be the way the very old and backward keep in touch with each other, like writing letters in long-hand or calling up talkback radio shows.

Gay people will all be married, divorced and remarried, signing pre-nuptial agreements and fighting custody battles over their pets, and it won't make a blind bit of difference to anything.

Nobody will remember Twitter.

It is easy to see that trends will pass and fashions change in half a century, but some things about Australia only three years ago already seem to belong firmly in the past, existing only as blurry, monochromatic memories, to be relived with detached horror like newsreels of World War II.

Who can really believe that John Howard was recently prime minister? That he used the SAS on asylum seekers? That he allowed serving soldiers to train as strike-breakers? That he sent troops to the Northern Territory to fight child abuse? That he

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wanted to put a question about Don Bradman in the Australian Citizenship Test?  
Perhaps one day somebody will make a TV drama about his government. They could  
call it Mad Men.