

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FREMANTLE: FIRST STEPS TO A NEW FUTURE

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The emigrant is uprooted from his native place. He is cast upon an alien shore, where there is everything to do, everything to make. He will bring some endowment from the old culture, but he must shape a new one.²

It was in Fremantle that Dutch families would take their first steps on Australian soil. This vignette looks at the Dutch migrants who, after a short stay in Perth of only a few hours through to a few days, sailed on to Port Melbourne; from there travelling by train to the Bonegilla Migrant camp in Wodonga, Victoria, on the shores of the Hume Weir.

In the fifties and sixties most migrants came to Australia by ship, often relishing their journey as the first holiday they had ever had. Romantic dreams of a tropical paradise on an exotic Pacific island came true for many

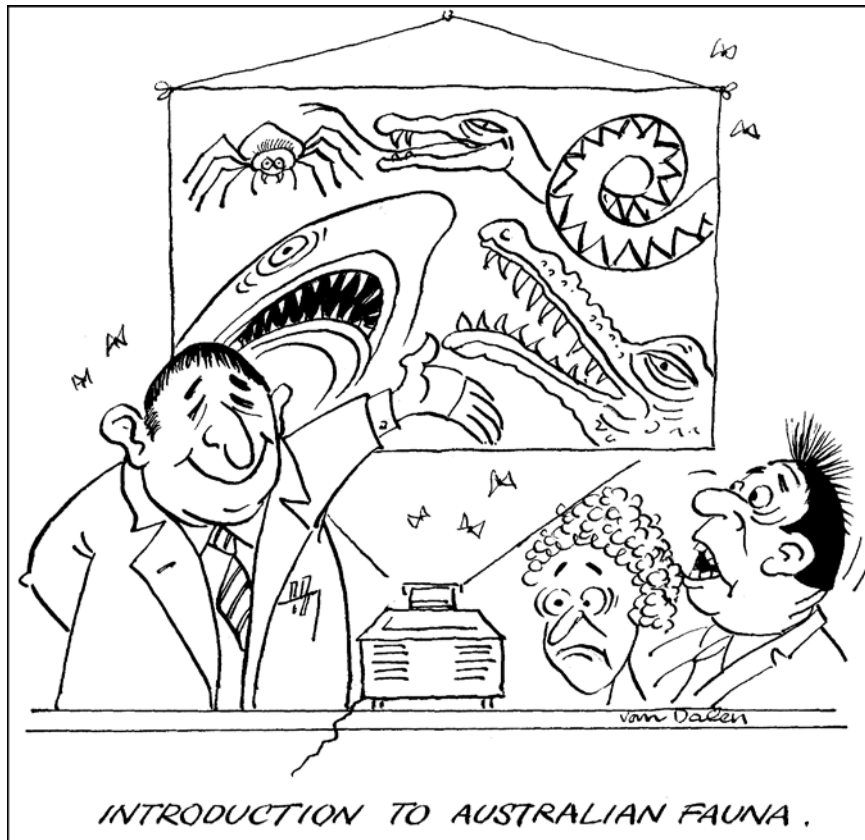


Figures 1 and 2
Cartoons from Nico van Dalen Bonegilla Collection, on permanent display at the exhibition *Where Waters Meet*, Bonegilla by Dirk and Marijke Eysbertse, at Block 19, Bonegilla Heritage Park, Bonegilla, Victoria.

who wandered in wide-eyed wonder through the parks and green spaces of Fremantle and Perth, enjoying the warm rays of the sun and marvelling at trees resembling giant pineapples. First impressions of this new and strange land are vividly and indelibly etched in the memories of every migrant.

'... We disembarked in Fremantle after a lot of formalities and just walked around. We saw a nice park, sat on the grass and cried out: Oh, how wonderful; grass under our bottom. Land. We were crazy. It was not really that beautiful but we were so happy...' Marie Baars, MS Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, 1956.

'...The harbour of Fremantle resembles those in the Mediterranean. Everything looks fantastic with the hills in the distance...



...The strange-looking trees, plants and flowers, (we even saw flowering cacti growing along the pavement), all bathed in glorious sunlight, are exceptionally beautiful. In Holland most Australian plants are grown indoors as pot plants...’ Marie Baars, MS Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, 1956

The new arrivals keenly observed the differences between The Netherlands and Australia and tried to make sense of Aussie English.³

‘...Of the 1400 passengers, 400 stayed in Western Australia. We left the ship to go sightseeing. We walked around for a few hours. Some of the cars we haven’t seen for years in Holland. Noisy, creaking trams are a welcome sight. They even transport prams, which hang on the front or back. Buses are a much older vintage than those back home...

...After dinner back on the ship, we went out on the town again. We ended up at a dance. You can’t imagine what the venue looked like: a huge wooden shed with plain wooden benches alongside the walls. Not very gezellig (cosy). The band played in the corner. One thing we didn’t like at all – so many drunks. Australian beer, containing more alcohol than Dutch beer, is drunk by the litre from dawn until night. We found most people hard to understand. After the dance, we stopped at a snack bar where we had a delicious hamburger, two toasted sandwiches with fried eggs, onions and minced steak, sweet and sour gherkins and tomato sauce. I can recommend it to you...

...Back on the ship, waterside workers were loading hundreds of kilos of fruit and tons of meat. Baggage was also unloaded. They were asking for volunteers as there were not enough workers on the wharf. Many passengers lent a hand...’ Hennie Bos, MS Johan van Oldenbarneveld 1952

‘...We finally approach Fremantle. I am quite nervous and at the same time excited about what the country will look like. Meeting the doctors and customs officers that came on board, I can see with some relief that the Australians are easy-going. Forty migrants will be settling permanently here...’ Familie Groenewegen, SS Waterman, 1962⁴

Some migrants thought they had entered a Wild West town – looking at historic buildings with their wide awnings and marvelling at the Australian men wearing akubra hats as if they were straight out of *Bonanza*.⁵ For others, seeing the stately buildings in the Perth city centre, it was a relief to realise they were back in a country with a European – albeit British – culture, after being at sea for so many weeks traversing a world, which appeared more Eastern with every port and nautical mile.

‘...Our first impressions in Fremantle are like those you experience when on holidays in a new land. The houses are built as you find

in the tropics with verandas, surrounded by strange looking trees, and gorgeous looking flowering shrubs, all bathed in sunlight. I have to add that everything looks less prosperous than in Holland – less solid, not as well maintained, badly in need of a coat of paint. Department stores are like the Bijenkorf and the Hema⁶, but prices are much higher. Sizes, weights, money, everything is different here...’ Hennie Bos, MS Johan van Oldenbarnevelt 1952.

‘...Our kids thought it was funny that Australian kids were ordinary white people. After Port Said and Aden, they had expected to find in Australia kids who were even darker-skinned. They were disappointed not to see any kangaroos...’ Familie Groenewegen, SS Waterman 1960

In the early 1600s Dutch explorers arrived at the shores of Western Australia on sailing boats by the grace of winds and tides, not eager to stay. Three centuries later migrants arrived on grand Dutch migrant ships, answering the call by an Australia eager to populate its country. Many of these ‘Dutchies’ and their descendants are proud to call Australia home.

ENDNOTES

- 1 All personal entries are from: Eysbertse D and Eysbertse M, *Where Waters Meet, Bonegilla, The Dutch Migrant Experience in Australia*, 3rd revised edition 2006, Erasmus Foundation, Melbourne.
- 2 Paul McGuire, *Australian Journey*, Heinemann 1942.
- 3 The cartoons in this article are part of the the *Nico van Dalen Bonegilla Collection*, on permanent display at the exhibition *Where Waters Meet, Bonegilla* by Dirk and Marijke Eysbertse, at Block 19, Bonegilla Heritage Park, Bonegilla, Victoria.
- 4 *SS Waterman*, *SS Zuiderkruis* and *SS Grootte Beer* were the three so-called Victory Ships, built in the USA for the war effort in World War II, and sold to the Dutch Government, who used them for troop transport and later as migrant ships to the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.
- 5 *Bonanza*, a Western TV series made in the USA, was very popular in The Netherlands from 1959 to 1973.
- 6 Department stores in The Netherlands.