

Australian Diary

On arrival in Sydney for a stint with the Centre for Independent Studies, I am ensconced in the bourgeois bohemia of McMahons Point – the kind of area in which it is easier to find langoustines than lavatory paper, or wasabi peas than washing-up liquid. Having arrived from Paris, the first thing I notice is the extremely high price of everything. Is this a good or a bad sign, of prosperity or uncompetitiveness, or both? I am sure economists would know the definitive answer to this question. Seeking spaghetti at the local grocery, I asked the pleasant assistant (with a ring through the septum of her nose to prove that she was an individual) where it was and she kindly took me to the shelf. ‘Here,’ she said, ‘this is very good – and it’s gluten free.’ ‘You don’t have any with gluten, do you?’ I asked. This was evidently a social *faux pas* of considerable dimension. It was as if I had asked for dirty postcards. She rooted about in the bottom shelf and eventually produced a packet. ‘Here,’ she scowled. It seems that these days, food sensitivity is a mark of sensitivity in general. Interestingly, in the *New England Journal of Medicine* last week there were two papers suggesting that food avoidance very early in life promoted food sensitivity rather than prevented it. You are right to be worried if you are worried. On the other hand, you are right not to be worried if you are not worried.

The food is very good in Sydney in a way in which I am sure it would not have been in, say, 1950. I am also almost certain that when people speak of the glories of multiculturalism they are mostly thinking of a lot of different restaurants, rather than Pali epigraphy or Somali tribal structure. As in all major cities nowadays, waiters prance around in Sydney telling the diners that the kale or quinoa was picked by vestal virgins on the first full moon after the equinox. I like good food as much as the next man, and am all in favour of not

taking the pleasures of life for granted; but this new food paganism, the reverence for ingredients and the way in which they are produced (or 'sourced'... always responsibly of course), irritates me slightly. It seems to imply that one is supposed to do more with the food on one's plate than merely to eat it. When the explanations are too elaborate, one begins to feel unworthy of what one is about to eat, because one is not absolutely sure that one can tell the difference between sea salt, say, and rock salt.

I am plunged into a round of appearances in the media. In England I refuse invitations to go on television by claiming subsequent engagements, or by telling them that in my opinion television is one of the great curses of the last century – which in part, I believe. This generally puts producers off, though not before they tell me that they agree with me. But in my role as a visiting scholar for the Centre for Independent Studies, I am pressganged into my press duties. Still jet-lagged, and with my head feeling as if it were full of lead shot, I find myself in the absurd position of having to give an opinion on the Government's proposal that the states of Australia should have charge of their own income tax. Never having devoted a moment's thought to the question before, I opine (more or less) that some politicians want to act as fairy godmother while casting others in the role of wicked step-sister. On television, in my limited experience, being able to say something is much more important than being able to say something true. Glibness is the highest quality.

I appear on *Q & A* with, *inter alia*, Germaine Greer. She is now notorious for having said that transsexual women are not the same as women, which seems to me a fairly innocuous proposition, but in our peculiar times the self-evident is dynamite in the way that satire is prophecy. She was asked a question about this, and I didn't have time to point out that in Britain, people are now allowed to backdate the change in their sex to their birth: they can change their birth

certificate. Even Stalin would have balked at this.

I travel for the weekend to Greg and Jenny Lindsay's farm about three hours north of Sydney. It is the kind of place where you feel immediately on arrival that you want to spend the rest of your life. I wish I were more of a naturalist, and knew whether there was some fundamental biological difference, other than size, between a wallaby and a kangaroo. The Australian fauna is the most romantic in the world, and I go looking for snakes. I have bought a field guide to Australian reptiles: who can resist the allure of creatures with names like the pig-nosed turtle or the pebble earless dragon? I am disappointed to meet no snakes. In the evening, we sit by the creek and – with a glass of wine – watch for platypuses (or is it platypi?) and discuss the appalling state of the world. None appears, and I think of a plot for a novel. A man spends his entire life searching for the thylacine in Tasmania. Only on his deathbed does he acknowledge that they are extinct. What a perfect metaphor for human existence! Or should I just say my existence?