

Chapter 7 Brisbane 1995



Monday, July 10, 5:00 PM -- Brisbane

I am sitting at the table in my hotel room trying hard to stay awake. I arrived in Brisbane at 9:15 this morning, after some 29 hours of travelling – four flights starting at 2:00 PM on Saturday. I felt that I slept fine on the 14-hour Los Angeles-Sydney flight, and I got out into the sun for a good part of the day today. I figure if I can just stay awake until a reasonable hour, a good night's sleep should put me comfortably on Australian time. But the bed sure looks inviting.

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I hadn't planned on doing a journal on this trip. I'm only gone a week and I don't expect Brisbane to have all that much of interest. But I've been intrigued by a couple of things so far, so I decided to write one even if it turns out to be short.

All three of my flights were close to full, so I never had an empty seat next to me. By rights I should have had one on the longest flight, though. I was on the aisle and a couple came in next to me. Then later a lone man appeared claiming the window seat was his. The couple realized that their seats were at the other end of the row, and they started to move. "Never mind," the lone man said, "I'll just sit over there. I don't mind. There's no one in the middle seat anyway." The couple thanked him and I tried to think of a legitimate reason to object. That empty seat would have been next to me, too. Oh well. Fortunately, the couple were fond of each other and stayed close. That usually left my armrest free.

My seat, incidentally, was two rows back from the restrooms and within reach of a water tap and cups in the wall of the restroom. That was handy.

At one point near the end of the flight lots of people were waiting to use the restrooms and the area was congested. Next to me in the aisle, two teenage girls were chatting with a woman and with some more young people in the row behind me. I realized they were returning from an exchange program in the U.S. and were part of a large group. Thinking of Allie, who is in the middle of her own People-to-People trip to the British Isles, I was very interested. Eventually I got their attention and asked what program they were with. They said Youth for Understanding, and I told them about Allie. Theirs had been a true exchange program with people going both ways. They spent a full year in the U.S., and they loved it. The woman was the mother of a boy in the program who had graduated high school in the U.S. as part of it, and she had flown to the U.S. to attend his graduation.

In Sydney I had just an hour between flights, once I'd cleared customs and immigration and taken a bus to the domestic terminal. I had changed some money, so I decided to go in search of something to buy. I found and bought some postcards, then rounded a corner and found a McDonald's. For a week before my trip, I'd been wanting a McDonald's Sausage McMuffin with Egg, and hadn't managed it. I looked at my watch, saw I still had 15 minutes before boarding, and ordered one. It was good, though subtly different from what I was used to.

I still don't know the geography here well at all, but I know Brisbane is on the east coast of Australia. The flight from Sydney was only an hour and twenty minutes long, and I could see the coastline the whole way. I gather that Sydney is also on the east coast, just further south. It was surprising how barren this coast looked, though. I'm sure it would be hard to find a stretch of coast in the U.S. that would be that unsettled. I didn't even see a road.

In Brisbane I took a taxi to my hotel and talked to the driver along the way. Or tried to. I had difficulty understanding almost everything he said. And yet – one thing that I did catch – he said that I didn't seem to have an accent. How can that be?

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Brisbane lies on the Brisbane River, which makes a big V as it winds east toward the coast. The heart of the city is in that V, and my hotel, the Heritage, is at the bottom of it overlooking the river. It is a very nice hotel. It is modern and over twenty stories tall, but it is built behind a small old building that you almost feel you are entering as you come in. And the lobby has a grand old style, so you really feel that it is an old, quality hotel that just happens to have new fixtures and modern amenities.

Once again, for example, my bathroom has both a bath and a separate shower, plus a separate little alcove for the toilet. There's a phone in that alcove, which could be handy, and a small TV on the counter. The towels are as big and plush as any I've ever used, and there is a terry cloth bathrobe for my use. The combination TV cabinet and chest of drawers also has a stocked fridge and a hot water heater for instant coffee and tea. There is a bathroom scale with an upholstered top to stand on, very comfortable, and it tells your weight in both stones and kilos. In short, everything I could want. Plus something I've never seen in a hotel room: an ironing board and iron in the closet. The guest information mentions that these are available, but not that they'd be in each room. I suspect they will disappear when the maid comes tomorrow, so maybe I should press my rumpled shirts while I can.

I carefully watched the toilet flush, to see if the water would go clockwise or counterclockwise, but the toilet bowl is square, and this seemed to interfere with the water doing anything interesting. I've also tried the tub and the sink, but the water seems to go down straight; it doesn't swirl. What should I make of that?

About the toilet, instead of a flush lever it has a divided button on the top. That is, it looks at first like a single round button, about 2 1/2 inches across. But a narrow strip down the middle is stationary, and the two sides push separately. On the right half, all the chrome is sort of textured. On the left half, only half of it is. It seems that you can flush with a little water or a lot, depending on how much you think you need. That requires more thought than I am used to giving to that activity.

(I saw this same arrangement later on other toilets, so apparently it is standard here. The Australians seem to be even more PC than we are, stressing ecology, recycling, handicap accessibility, etc., to a great extent. There are wheelchair ramps everywhere, for example.)

Another odd thing: the key to my room is metal and shaped like a normal key, but it is smooth on both edges. Instead of the usual jagged ins and outs along one side, this just has three narrow black stripes of a different material imbedded the length of the blade, on both sides. It then works like those key "credit cards" that so many hotels now have. There's a little light on the door glowing red, and it turns to green when you insert the key. Unlike those credit-card keys, at this point you can just turn the key in the lock and it opens the door. It feels much more natural, and I like it.

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Another nice thing: The key was handed to me when I checked in, tucked into a small piece of white cardboard with the room number written on it. The cardboard turns out to be folded, and when you unfold it, a map of Brisbane opens out of it. It had been cleverly folded inside so that it would open and close automatically. You carry this with you in your pocket, and you not only have your room number written down (it is not on the key), but you have as much of a map as you'll ever need.

When I arrived, I took a shower right away – badly needed since my last one was on Saturday morning. In the shower, the temperature control is marked in degrees – centigrade unfortunately, though actually I've little idea what temperature I use for a shower even in Fahrenheit. When you turn this knob up, it stops at 40°, but there is a red button you can push if you want to go further. I figured it knew what I needed better than I did, and I left it at 40°. It was perfect.

It was sunny, so I grabbed my camera and something to read and went out. After I dressed, of course. I put on my dockers, my dockersiders, and a short-sleeved print shirt, expecting to blend right into this tropical paradise. No way. Almost everyone on the street was in jackets or sweaters, and many were in coat and tie. OK, Monday is a workday, and this is a big city, so I could excuse the coat and tie. But why was everyone so bundled up? Even in the shade I was comfortable, and in the sun it was glorious! I guess they are just used to it warmer here. It is winter, after all. At one point I passed a restaurant that was outdoors but under a kind of tent. It had a sign, "It's warm inside." I thought, "No, thanks."

I walked up the main street that the hotel is on, Edward Street, away from the river, where I was told I'd find a mall. Lots of signs were familiar, including one for Hubbard-Dianetics. Shortly after I saw that, a young man approached me and said he was taking a survey, could I answer a few questions? I said, "I'm not from here," and as he said that it didn't matter, I read on his name tag "Church of Scientology." I quickly said I wasn't interested and walked away as he called after me, "What have you heard about us?"

I walked past all sorts of shops, and a great many signs. They seem to use more, bigger, or brighter signs than we do – that was the only thing that felt Asian. The signs themselves were routine, including Subway and, again, McDonald's. I stepped into one place that had coffee, focaccia bread, pastries, and various salads – very trendy like you'd find in Ann Arbor. I wasn't hungry though and left.

There was lots of traffic, and at each intersection there were the usual lights, for cars and for pedestrians. There were also big buttons for us to push to get the "walk" signal. What was unusual, though, was that after you pushed the button it would click quietly a couple of times a second until the "walk" signal appeared, at which point it let out a different and louder noise that I can't describe, and that could be heard on all four corners. This sound continued for about half the light, then stopped. I found this hard to get used to, but I can see it would be great if you were blind.

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After five or six blocks I came to Queen Street, two long blocks of which to my left had been made into a mall. That doesn't begin to describe it, however. Many of the buildings along it had been renovated to include arcades with many shops inside them. Out in what used to be the street there are several restaurants and many other structures of various sorts. Near the middle of it all was a stage with the Australian Army Band playing on it, and next to it sat a military tank on display. It was quite a scene.

I walked through the mall and at the other end found the river, a bridge crossing it, and a grand old building just before it labelled Treasury. It looked like a treasury, but an old one and not at all like the rest of this modern city. There were lots of people passing in and out, but they weren't dressed like the financial types you'd expect. In curiosity I went in, and found myself in a casino! The whole building, including a roofed-over central courtyard, had been turned into a casino. I watched for a while and vowed to return.

Back outside I looked across the river and thought I could see an interesting building down to the left. I crossed and walked down there. I found myself, as I learned, in the South Bank Parklands. This is a long strip by the river left over from a world's fair in the 80's. It was nicely landscaped, had various attractions for children and adults, plus restaurants, shops, and a boat that ran up and down its length in a little canal. I rode the boat, paying for a ticket that also included admission to the butterfly house and a rainforest exhibit. Both were what you'd expect, with live butterflies in the first flitting among us and live plants and animals (koala's, crocodiles, etc.) in the second. The basement of the butterfly house had insects, though not running free. I'd been told there would be a "barking spider," but I only found one spider and its name wasn't that or worth remembering.



A panoramic view of Streets Beach, South Bank Parklands, from Wikipedia 2023

After getting my fill of the Parklands, I walked back across the bridge and to the hotel. While writing this, Colin Hargreaves (the conference organizer) called and reminded me I'd be joining him for dinner. This was good news, since I'd felt I was scheduled for something but had nothing written down. I asked how to dress, and he said casual would be fine.

July 15, 6:50 PM, Chicago

Well, I didn't keep this up. But now I find myself almost home, in a plane at O'Hare waiting for weather to clear. I might as well see how far I can get.

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The dinner Monday evening was surprisingly formal. Casual, my foot! Everyone else had coats and ties, and I was in one of my more colorful short-sleeved shirts. The hotel had given us a room for the dinner, and there were perhaps ten of us. The others had all been in Brisbane for a few days, involved in a training course that preceded the conference.

I sat between Colin and Joe Francois, whom I'd met several times before and liked. Joe is at the newly created World Trade Organization, and he'd come from Geneva, Switzerland, for this. He is an American, though, and is having an interesting problem with his name. In America it has always been pronounced "Fran coy," or sometimes "Fran coys." But in Switzerland everyone naturally wants to say "Fran swah." And now he doesn't really know what to call himself.

I talked more to Colin, however, unfortunately. Or should I say listened? I'd spoken to him on the phone a few times and he'd seemed ordinary. He had a British accent, as I now learned he'd emigrated from England back in the 80's. Apparently he never became animated on the phone, however, because I now found that every time he did get at all animated (which was often) his voice would shoot up an octave or so. It was extraordinary.

He talked about a variety of trade-related topics, most of which I later heard him repeat during the conference. And he went on and on about how the official from the WTO responsible for services had cancelled at the last minute. We heard about this, too, over and over, during the conference. The only thing Colin spoke of that didn't come up later was his ire at Margaret Thatcher for the way she broke the coal miners' union. Colin apparently leans quite far to the left in his politics. As he described what she did, it sounded sensible to me, and I said so. That was a sure way to get him animated, as if I needed to, and we argued about this for quite a while. Rather than label me a fascist, however, he seemed to conclude that I was just a typically peculiar American.

I left the dinner as soon as I could, politely, and went to bed. I was to join the group for both lunch and dinner the next day, and I really can't remember much else of what I did. I know that at one point I walked through part of a very nice botanical garden that was right next to the hotel, but that's all.

The conference lunch included many of the speakers Colin had recruited from Australia, and they didn't seem like academics. One asked me if I got to lots of services conferences and I said no, this was my first, realizing that he had a whole different conception of what this conference was than I did.

Through the day it became clear that this conference was, in many ways, a fiasco. The five of us who'd come from abroad had been invited a year ago when the topic of the conference was trade modelling. It had been part of an annual series of conferences on economic modelling that Colin had run before. But scheduling problems for other Australian modelers had arisen, and somehow the topic changed to trade in services. He also expanded the conference to include another sixty or so people from the services industries who would give talks about these sectors and would probably have no interest in modelling. I was lucky, since our modelling happened, over the

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year, to turn to services, so my topic was appropriate, if not my method of analysis. I had prepared several overheads of equations that I had to scrap. Others had a harder time and had to completely redo their presentations.

The lunch was odd in only one way: there was no place to sit. It was a buffet requiring knife and fork, but we were expected to eat standing up.

Then Colin had scheduled a meeting – a sort of pre-conference conference – at which all us speakers were expected to interact somehow. Apparently, Colin had been counting on the WTO dignitary to speak to us, and when he didn't show up Colin asked three others to make a few remarks. Thankfully these three did not include me, though at one point Colin looked stricken by the thought that he should have asked me. I assured him, sincerely, that I was glad he hadn't, then watched as the other three made uncomfortable attempts to fill time. Everyone seemed glad to disperse when the invitation for discussion afterwards had no takers.

We were to meet again in the hotel lobby, outside which a coach (Australian for bus) would be waiting to take us to the Convention Center for dinner. The coach never showed, so Colin sent us off in taxis, insisting we should give him the chitty. (Chitty, in Colin's animated high voice, is either Australian or Colin for receipt.)



Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre, from Wikipedia 2023

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The Convention Center was a huge modern structure across the river, just behind the South Bank Parklands where I'd been before. This was where the conference would be held for the next two days, and Colin had brought us here for cocktails and ... finger foods. Waitresses circulated among us with odd little canapés that Colin eventually mentioned would take the place of dinner.

I stood mostly talking to Joe, to a Brazilian economist Carlos Braga, and to Peter Wilkoxen, a young economist from Texas. We'd all met before occasionally, but we were hardly friends. Until that night. Throw us into an unfamiliar crowd of nonacademic service types and we become best buddies instantly. At one point a man came up and joined our little group. He handed out his business card, and the others gave him cards in return. I didn't, though, because I'd forgotten to put my card case into my pocket. Then we returned to our conversation and ignored him. Eventually he drifted away. Carlos said he was offended that I hadn't given him my card, but apparently he was joking. Looking later at the man's card, I found he was from a big Australian bank that was sponsoring the conference.

When we'd had our fill of canapés, our little group decided to return to the hotel. Before we could get out the front door for a taxi, Colin intervened and insisted we take the ferry. This turned out to be good advice – I used the ferry from then on to go to and from the conference and I enjoyed it. But I had my doubts that evening when he enlisted his pre-teenage daughter to show us the way. She took us unnecessarily all the way to the bridge and back – a walk that was almost as far as to the hotel itself. The others went out to dinner at that point, but I just went to bed.

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Brisbane skyline and river, including ferries, from Wikipedia 2023

The next two days were the conference itself, and are not worth dwelling on here. I attended only the major sessions, including my own, and skipped all the ones featuring the service industries. I had a good excuse for that, unfortunately, since a call from the office at home had given me work that occupied the afternoon. Fortunately, I was able to do it at a cafe in the Botanical Garden, and it was very pleasant.

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Brisbane City Botanical Garden, from Wikipedia 2023

Wednesday evening there were cocktails again, and this time a real dinner. It was at the Customs House, another grand old building from colonial times. It was beautiful, as was the walk along the river from it back to the hotel afterwards. Brisbane (rhymes with Lisbon, by the way) does a wonderful job with lights at night on buildings, on bridges, even on some rock cliffs that we could see across the river.

Thursday the conference wound up by late afternoon. I have to admit that on Wednesday and Thursday, the conference went well, and that Colin ultimately deserved the applause that he got at the end for putting it together.

Colin and his wife invited our small group of academic speakers for dinner in the hotel restaurant. I hadn't eaten there before because I'd been appalled by the prices. Colin said he felt he owed us all a dinner and would pay for this. I couldn't decide if this was good news or bad,



Brisbane Customs House, from Wikipedia 2023

since I'd been assuming that he'd reimburse us for all our meals there. The dinner was as expensive as expected, but not nearly as good.

On Friday I was a tourist. With the help of a visitors' bureau at the conference (two elderly women at a card table), I had tried to line up tours that would include the Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary and the Australian Woolshed. The tours weren't operating, however, so I went on my own. I took a boat to Lone Pine, then a bus back to Brisbane, then a train to and from the Woolshed. It all worked, to my surprise.

Lone Pine has the largest number of koalas (over 100) of any place like it. They are just koalas, by the way, not "koala bears." They also had a field full of kangaroos and a few emus (like ostriches) plus a few other animals in cages. The koalas are not caged. They live in eucalyptus trees, with just a low fence between us and them, and apparently they have no desire to go anywhere else. Actually, they sleep over twenty hours a day and eat the rest of the time. They eat only eucalyptus leaves, which give them lots of fiber but very little energy. How they survived in the wild is not clear to me. Come to think of it, though, I guess there aren't any large predators in Australia besides man. Or none who can climb trees, anyhow.

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I had my picture taken holding a koala, which is one of the standard things that all tourists do here. It was fun, though. They are just as cuddly as they look.

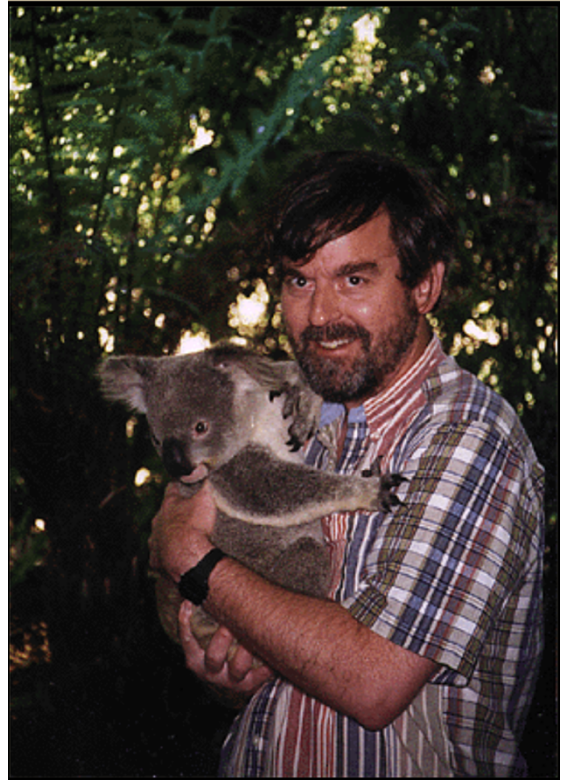
For the Woolshed I took the train, which was to drop me in the town of Ferny Grove just 800 meters from the Woolshed. That's about half a mile, so I knew it would be a bit of a walk, but I assumed there would be signs directing me. There weren't. I asked a couple of boys who got off the train with me and they directed me to a highway and said to go along it a "fair walk" – fifteen minutes or so. They looked doubtful. There was nothing else to do, though, so I started out. There were still no signs, but after a little bit I met a couple coming the other way and I confirmed with them that I was going the right way. They said it was just 'round the bend, and it was.

The Woolshed features a Ram Show, in which eight rams of different breeds enter the hall, one by one, and trot up a ramp to the stage onto pedestals. A young Paul Hogan type tells us all about them, then we watch as another fellow shears a sheep for us and a sheep dog comes in and balances on the backs of the rams. Then we go outside and see a little demonstration of herding. For me the best part, though, was when the show was over, and we could mingle in a field with kangaroos. There was food to feed them, and our group included lots of little kids (human). I had a great time taking pictures of them all.

Back in Brisbane I went to the casino and played the slots for a little while. I watched some blackjack too, but the minimum bet was \$5, and I didn't try it.

I thought of skipping dinner, but then found a restaurant on the mall that included kangaroo as an entree. I had to try that and did. I think the meat tasted good, but I'm not sure. It was prepared Szechuan style, and the spices pretty well covered it up.

We have just landed in Detroit, safely.



Koala and friend, from trip



Postcard