



Tawny Frogmouths

ETERNITY

new stories in the gallery

Three new stories were installed in the *Eternity* gallery earlier this year and they couldn't be more different from one another. Expatriate Australian poet Peter Porter joined Separation, marine biologist William Saville-Kent now graces Devotion and a young circus performer, Bree Le Cornu, leapt into Thrill. As in every *Eternity* story, each focuses on the person's experience of one emotion using their own words, images and a video, and a significant object. All three had a strong connection to the chosen emotion: Peter Porter's separation from Australia; William Saville-Kent's enthusiasm for Australian wild and marine life; and Bree Le Cornu's literally high-flying life in the Flying Fruit Fly Circus. Each took me in very different directions: I was reading modern poetry, delving into nineteenth-century scientific articles and transcribing interviews I had recorded with a thirteen-year-old artist.

Most people can relate to the idea of making a new life in a new country, for a little while or even indefinitely. In a global village, people can pursue their careers wherever they can get a working visa. Just about every Australian knows someone who has gone away and hasn't come back, yet, so it isn't surprising that about five per cent of all people who consider themselves Australian are expatriates. Moving to distant lands is not the punishment the ancient Greeks and Romans considered exile – it is often considered a right and choice. Is it a brain drain or are some people programmed to be travellers? We're always curious about Australians who live overseas and the way they represent Australia. How they live through it themselves is not explored as frequently. They often talk or write about feeling a sense of separation, dealing with issues of identity and dislocation. In looking for a candidate for an Australian expatriate story, I found that few had thought about this issue in all its complexities as keenly, or expressed it as well, as the eminent poet Peter Porter.

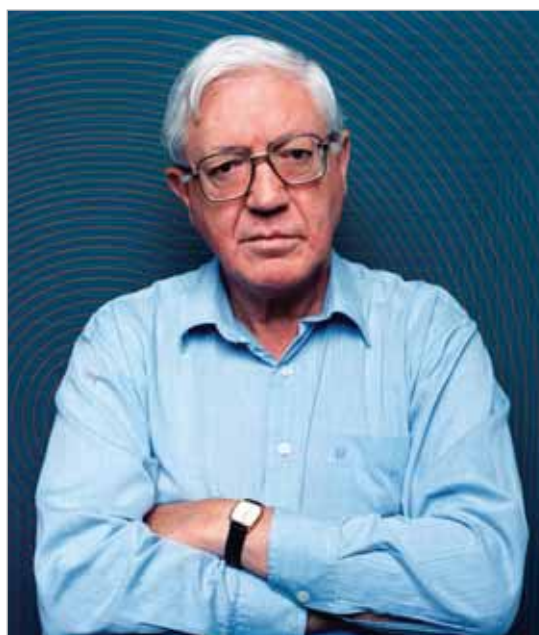


Photo: Courtesy of Polly Borland

Peter Porter

Born in Brisbane in 1929, Porter left Australia in 1951 for London on the liner *Otranto*. He writes of being drawn to London: 'I felt sure I was getting closer to the passionate centre of the true and the real'. There he supported his poetry by working in bookselling, advertising and journalism. His first volume, *Once Bitten, Twice Bitten* was published in 1961. A rare first edition is the signature object of the exhibition. From 1974 onwards, Porter has visited Australia regularly, reconnecting with his Australian past. He has thought deeply about being Australian, and written and spoken at length about his sense of separation from Australia, how his attitude to Australia has been coloured by his personal experience and changed over time. He writes of his identity as a poet and product of country: 'I think the poet's true country is his own mind, and that will receive stimuli from anywhere and everywhere.' When he left, distance isolated Australia to an extent it no longer does, physically and culturally. Leaving Australia now need not be such a life-altering decision or involve an element of escape.



Seahorses

New to Devotion, William Saville-Kent, on the other hand, was an English naturalist who spent about two decades in Australia around the turn of the twentieth century. He began his career with ambition, working at London's Royal College of Surgeons, the British Museum and several English aquaria. His letters and published research from this time demonstrate his early potential. At the aquaria, for instance, he had to deal with tensions between their roles as tourist attractions and his ambitions for them as research institutions. He came to Australia in 1884 as Superintendent and Inspector of Fisheries in Tasmania, later moving to Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, and various islands in North Queensland. In these positions his devotion to his work and pioneering efforts had a considerable impact on the early management of Australian fisheries and reef conservation. His official work had the added benefit of taking him to remote locations, enabling him pursue his more personal interests in Australian flora and fauna.

He proved an enthralling subject, largely because throughout his life he produced a myriad of scientific and popular articles and several magnificently illustrated books. Two books relate to Australia. One of these, *The Great Barrier Reef of Australia: its products and potentialities* (1893), is on display in *Eternity*, open to a stunning chromolithograph. Saville-Kent was also a keen photographer, using the medium to document and record his travels and research, and illustrate his books. Many are of astonishing quality.

He was a born populariser, keen to disseminate his expertise. A good example is his 1897 work, *The Naturalist in Australia*, imbued with genial personal anecdotes and some fairly serious scientific observations. In this book, he writes at length about the two tawny frogmouths he kept as pets while he was in Brisbane in the 1890s. He notes that 'while they displayed with delightful abandon all their natural habits and idiosyncrasies before members of the household, the near approach of strangers, and more especially of children, was an almost invariable signal for their assuming ... [an] ... erect, stick-like attitude.' He made the most of the opportunity to observe and photograph them and even records being able to communicate with other tawny frogmouths he found in Australian zoos. With

Bree Le Cornu



Photo: George Serras

them, he writes, he was able to 'establish quite a friendly interchange of greetings'. His devotion to nature seems to have pervaded his entire life.

The final story, on Bree Le Cornu, a member of the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, is also a story of hard work, but captures best the emotion of thrill. Bree is a young teenager, highly skilled at the sometimes dangerous craft of circus performing. Particularly keen on 'flying through the air', she often performs on the trapeze and other apparatuses at high altitudes. The Flying Fruit Fly Circus let National Museum senior photographer George Serras and I observe and photograph them workshoping a new production. They have lent us a trapeze for the exhibition.

The Flying Fruit Fly Circus, founded in 1979, is Australia's most prominent youth circus school and group. Based in Albury-Wodonga, it has built a reputation as an innovative and exciting training ground for young performers. It regularly travels overseas and around Australia with new productions. The video accompanying the exhibition uses extracts from one of their recent productions, *Skipping on Stars*.

The story explores Bree's circus life, particularly her experience of belonging to the Flying Fruit Fly Circus and especially what it is like to perform. It begins with Bree's feelings about the physical thrill of doing circus tricks. Next we explored the fact that she is in high school, training and learning with schoolmates and friends. Performing is an enormous part of a circus performer's life: I asked her about nervousness, how they approach performing in front of an audience. The circus also tours widely, taking the circus troupe to places they would not otherwise experience. Bree says that she loves meeting new people. Finally, the story focuses on the role of circus in her life. Bree told me: 'Circus is the most important thing to me.'

While the stories are very different, they illustrate the extraordinary places the Australian experience can take you, whether it is across the seas, immersed in Australia's unique flora and fauna, or closer to the stars.

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