



THE LAND BEFORE AVOCADO

Journeys in a lost Australia

Richard Glover



Contents

	Foreword	1
Chapter One	Parents, Teachers and the Locked Stationery Cupboard	13
Chapter Two	The Gendered Agenda	39
Chapter Three	Let's Eat	72
Chapter Four	Car Trouble	93
Chapter Five	The Wages of Sin	113
Chapter Six	Making Our Own Fun	138
Intermission	Fifteen Things Worth Reclaiming from the '70s.	156
Chapter Seven	Buying Time	165
Chapter Eight	The Smorgasbord or the Straitjacket	186
Chapter Nine	The Enlargers and the Straighteners	216
Chapter Ten	The Rose-coloured Now	239
	Bibliography	267
	Acknowledgements	269
	A Note on Sources	271

Foreword

I'm on a quest. I want to visit a place that's radically different to the one in which I live. This, I know, is the dream of many Australians – people who head off to places like Vietnam, Kenya or Iceland. But I want more. I want to visit somewhere *really* different: a place that is scary and weird, dangerous and incomprehensible, and – now and then – surprisingly appealing.

It's the Australia of my childhood.

I know, once I arrive, I'll encounter a strange country. Drink driving is commonplace. Parenting is lackadaisical. The food, by and large, is awful. The fashions? Well, we'll get to that.

If the country of my childhood still existed, the Department of Foreign Affairs – always cautious on its Smart Traveller website – would surely issue its stiffest advice: 'Do Not Travel'.

SUMMARY

Exercise caution when visiting 1960s and 1970s Australia.

- Depending on the year, the death penalty may still apply. Homosexuality is illegal and may attract a prison sentence. Rape in marriage is allowed. Corporal punishment is applied in all schools. Traffic accidents are common and motor vehicles lack basic safety equipment. Smoking is widespread and is permitted in all indoor locations. Safari suits are worn. They are considered stylish.

Exercise extreme caution when ordering breakfast:

Avocado, smashed or otherwise, will not be available.

Sometimes, when I think about the Australia of just a few decades ago, I find myself doubting my own memories and those of my friends. Could it be true that coffee was a rarity – hardly available in any form other than a spoonful of instant? Did teachers really inspect the underpants of female students, making the young girls lift their dresses in order to check the colour and style? Could it be that women were sacked from the public service the moment they were married – the rebellious ones hiding their wedding rings and even their pregnant bellies in order to survive in employment for a few more months? Did Catholics really find it hard to get a job once they admitted their religion?

And what of my memory of the typical motor vehicle – parked by the roadside, bonnet raised, its radiator boiling over at the mere mention of a hill?

Richard Glover

Could it be true, more to the point, that we lacked avocado – the fruit, smashed or otherwise, that has become a symbol of modern millennial Australia and its myriad pleasures?

*

I spent my teenage years in Canberra after my parents bought a local newsagency. My father was friends with the other local shopkeepers, including Gus, who ran the café around the corner. One bright autumn day, in March 1970, Gus decided to pop a couple of chairs on the pavement outside his premises. He thought people might care to take their refreshments in the sun and watch the passing parade as he'd seen people do in Europe. Naturally, the police were called. According to my father, they arrived in force, ordering the handful of chairs be taken back into the café. Gus – Viennese born, a refugee from the Nazis – acquiesced. He understood how to treat a uniformed man. All the same, a public debate ensued. Some locals cheered on Gus, this Che Guevara of the wooden chair. Others encouraged the authorities to hold firm, worried by the risk to public safety of the alfresco consumption of caffeinated beverages. My father was pro-small business and therefore pro-Gus. According to my dad, Gus had survived a Nazi labour camp during the war, so understood exactly what he was dealing with when it came to the Federal Government's Department of the Interior.

The Land Before Avocado



With my father in
1968, dreaming of a
land with avocado.

All these years on, I'm left with a question: was my father telling the story as it happened? Or am I the one who is bending the truth – taking up my father's tale and adding embellishments? After all, it does sound unlikely: a squad of police officers called to remove a café chair from a pavement.

Time-travel is becoming easier by the moment. I decided to fact-check my memory. I logged onto the website called Trove – the digitised newspaper archive established by the National Library of Australia. I quickly worked out Gus's surname – Petersilka – then found a report in the local newspaper, the *Canberra Times*. It was March 1970 and – yes – the Department

Richard Glover

of the Interior had ordered Gus Petersilka to desist from placing any table or chair on the pavement, as they may ‘obstruct the movement of pedestrians’. Later reports said the tables and chairs were confiscated – ‘disappearing on the back of a Department of the Interior truck’.

Trove then offered a flurry of letters to the editor, attacking the department. One said: ‘When everyone is constantly crying out that Canberra has no “soul” isn’t this exactly the sort of thing that Canberra needs?’

A few weeks later, the department backed down, allowing three tables and six chairs for a trial period of six months, but only if Gus agreed to ‘indemnify the Commonwealth against any claim or liability arising out of the use of the footpath’.

The dispute simmered for a while then boiled over in a final blaze in 1974. Disgruntled perhaps by its previous defeat, the department staged a pre-dawn raid. This time, they removed an awning that Gus had constructed over the tables. Again, the public rallied. Again, my father referenced Nazis in his day-by-day commentary: ‘The department? They could have given Hitler some tips ...’ In the end, the awning was returned. To celebrate, Gus installed what became a permanent sign in his shop window: ‘Do it now. Tomorrow there may be a law against it.’

*

The Land Before Avocado

So, in this at least, my memory has been proved correct. In Canberra in the 1970s, you really could be raided by police after serving a cup of coffee in the sun. A few months after my internet research, I was sitting in Garema Place, near what is still Gus's Place, with my older son, Dan. He'd recently moved to Canberra, the town of my adolescence. Garema Place is now a sea of outdoor tables and chairs. I wondered if any of these restaurateurs – Korean, Lebanese, Indian – knew the story of the 1970s Battle of the Chairs.

I told Dan the tale, as proved by my research, and he instantly expressed doubts. 'Really?' he said. 'The police were called? I'm having trouble imagining that happening ...'

I decided the only response was to serve up another shock. 'Since we are talking about cafés, I wonder if you realise we didn't have avocado. It didn't exist.'

At that, he rolled his eyes. 'Dad, that's very, very unlikely.'

*

Later that afternoon, I decided to do more time-travelling. This time, I was trying to find the truth about avocado. At first sight, Dan's doubt seemed well founded. Avocados, I soon discovered, were available throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, the first commercial crop was planted in Queensland in 1946. I found several recipes in old copies of the *Australian Women's Weekly*

Richard Glover

suggesting the use of avocado – including a 1972 article titled ‘The Experts Tell: How to Give the Perfect Dinner Party’.

It offered a recipe for Avocado Cream.

3 large ripe avocados

1 cup cream

1 cup white wine

Cut each avocado in half lengthways, remove stone, scoop out flesh, being careful not to break skins. Mash avocado flesh well with fork, stir in cream and wine. Spoon mixture back into avocado shells.

Serves 6

Note: For the white wine in this recipe, use Traminer Riesling.

Oh, yes: cream, sweet white wine and avocado – ‘mashed’. I wondered: was this history’s first mention of what was to become the ‘smashed avo’ breakfast – that destroyer of dreams, that harbinger of doom, that squanderer of fortunes – now cited as a prime example of the frivolous spending that prevents today’s millennials from joining the housing market?

Despite such recipes, avocados remained a rarity. I came across a pamphlet from the time published by the Department of Public Health, which included avocados in a list of ‘unusual vegetables’ – the department hoping to ‘persuade the housewife

to purchase them for occasional variety.’ On the same list: leeks, capsicum and eggplant.

Meanwhile, the *Australian Women’s Weekly* was developing doubts about avocado. In an article headlined ‘Enemy Foods’, published in March 1972, avocado was listed in position 39, ahead – in terms of damage to the body – of well-known poisons such as baked potato, maple syrup and ‘hard liquor’. Said the magazine: ‘Research has shown, that these are, unfortunately, the sort of foods fat people almost universally prefer.’ This enthusiasm for avocado by fat Australians may be why I was never offered one as a child. No sooner did someone grow one, than it was guzzled by a fatty.

In 1974, the avocado suffered another blow. Abnormally high summer rainfall affected the fledgling production, destroying the small industry that had developed. Around half of the nation’s avocado trees died from root rot. The survivors went into severe decline. So how did the avocado achieve its comeback? I made contact with Dr Ken Pegg, a key figure in the industry in the 1970s. Now in his 80s, he recalls attending a crisis meeting with the Queensland Department of Agriculture at which he recommended a planting scheme be implemented using clean stock. The government’s Director of Horticulture was not convinced. ‘Avocados,’ he told Pegg in 1977, ‘are an industry without any future in Australia. Just accept it.’

Pegg ignored the advice. Growers in Mount Tamborine were experimenting with mulches, chicken manure and calcium;

Richard Glover

Pegg added some science. Finally, by about 1984, the root rot was defeated. By the early 1990s, avocados were becoming a significant crop. Their importance has grown ever since. They are now eaten at the annual rate of 3.5 kilograms per Australian. The industry – the one that had ‘no future in Australia’ – is now worth close to \$1 billion a year.

In 2017, a young Queensland scientist, Louisa Parkinson, discovered a new species of fungal pathogen that occasionally causes disease in avocados. She named the fungus *Gliocladiopsis peggii*, after her personal hero, Dr Ken Pegg, the man who gave Australia avocados.

*

In the battle with my son’s incredulity – ‘we didn’t have avocados’ – I decided to score it as a tie. We had avocados. They did exist. But not many of them. And only for a while. And even when the crop managed to survive, the fatties polished them off.

I grew up in The Land Before Avocado.

*

Nostalgia for the 1970s is everywhere. A musical based on the ’70s songs of ABBA, *Mamma Mia*, has become a fixture. *Puberty Blues*, the ’70s novel, has returned as a TV series. Seventies

The Land Before Avocado

fashion – much derided even at the time – has a new lease on life. On Australian TV, you can hardly move for bio-pics with '70s themes – the stories of Molly Meldrum, Ita Buttrose, Paul Hogan and Peter Brock, among others.

It's natural to look back at one's younger years through rosy spectacles. For most of us, it was the last time we were attractive, wrinkle-free and had knees that didn't creak. But what was the wider society like? What were its values?

The Australia of my youth had many virtues. To cite just three:

- None of the negative side of the internet – the whole body-shaming, anxiety-inducing, time-destroying project of social media – occasionally lifting our mood, more often depressing it.
- No 'gig economy' – that phrase people use when they are trying to create a hip feel around the destruction of workers' rights.
- Houses were cheaper. A lot cheaper. No, really: a *lot*.

But as I surf in this sea of happy nostalgia, I wonder: how does this period really compare to today? Have we simply forgotten what life was like? Should we be more grateful for the changes that have come to Australia in the decades since?

The Australia of my youth also had many vices. To cite just three:

Richard Glover

- Banks, by and large, wouldn't lend money to women – not unless they had a male guarantor.
- Life was difficult if you were different in any way.
- If you were a child, no one would take your side.

Of course, most talkback radio tends in the opposite direction: it's all about using a fondly imagined past as a stick with which to beat the present.

- We got to roam everywhere, just 'be back by dusk' ...
- We learnt proper spelling and grammar – with proper discipline in the classroom ...
- There was more sunshine back then, and the opposite sex was better looking.

Well, you get the idea.

In a recent survey, Australians were asked the question: is the world better or worse than it was 50 years ago? Older Australians were particularly likely to say the past was a paradise: only 40 per cent of those 50 and older said life was better than it had been in 1967. This despite a lift of 12 years in life expectancy between 1965 and now – from 70.8 years in 1967 to 82.4 years. Plus a sharp lift in education levels, road safety, the rights of women, access to foreign travel, and a growth in tolerance when it comes to homosexuality, religion, race ...

The Land Before Avocado

*

My quest was starting to take form. Was this a golden time compared to today? Or was it a bit shit? To find out, I'd have to time-travel through that lost continent, the era of my childhood, with all its attendant dangers and delights. It was the period that spanned the late '60s and the early '70s. Say: 1965 to 1975 – from when I was seven to when I was seventeen.

Perhaps you'd like to come along.