From Dream to Reality: A study of British migration to Western Australia in the 1960s, with special emphasis on those who travelled on the SS Castel Felice

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CONCLUSION

‘We still love England’
Making a happy home in Western Australia

Gerrie says that the £10 Poms were ‘lured by promotional films featuring exotic fruits, cheap meat and dream homes’.1 This thesis examines the decision of Britons in the 1960s to migrate to Western Australia, their departure from home and voyage to Fremantle, their arrival and settling in, and finally whether the dreams they held of Australia were realised. The participants in my study are a fair sample of those British migrants who settled in Western Australia in the 1960s. The ratio of families to single persons is similar to that given by Appleyard2 and also to the passenger list of the Castel Felice when it arrived in Fremantle in January 1966.3 While relying, as it does, on the memories of over one hundred British migrants who made the journey in the 1960s, it is possible that these memories may have been altered by time. However, in general, the responses in many ways reflect those reported by Hammerton and Thomson.4

The respondents, who came from all parts of the United Kingdom, said that they used a variety of sources to gain information to help in their emigration decision. One of the realities for me has been the difficulty in gaining access to the publications that may have lured these migrants to come here. Migrant information publicity was put out by federal and state immigration departments and other bodies, such as employer organisations, to attract people to Australia. Extensive searches in Australian archives and libraries have revealed only a few and it was fortunate that one of my respondents, Ken Patterson, loaned to me some of the material that has featured in this work. In an immigration survey by the Australian

1 Anthea Gerrie, ‘The £10 Poms’, Sunday Times, 27 April 1997, p.10
2 R.T Appleyard, British Emigration to Australia, Australian National University, Canberra, 1964, p.122.
3 Australian Government, National Archives, Incoming passenger list Castel Felice arrived Fremantle 19/1/1966. K259/4
4 Hammerton and Thomson, various titles.
Population and Immigration Council in 1973 it was found that there were difficulties in obtaining correct information about life in Australia at the time. This was seen as a real problem by at least 50% of new migrants and there was also the problem of prospective migrants misunderstanding the information they were given.\(^5\) Both assisted and sponsored migrants had access to the services of the Australian Immigration information services, and sponsored migrants often received supplementary materials from their sponsor. The official objective of the £10 assisted passage scheme was to bring out as many British migrants as possible, writes Jupp.\(^6\) It is perhaps important to understand that whatever information there was in the publications, the interviewing officers, who wanted to persuade as many people as possible to migrate, may have painted a picture that was not strictly accurate. Perhaps, as one of my respondents said, the officers ‘were all bullshitters’.\(^7\)

Although the participants came from all parts of the United Kingdom the majority came from the north and Midlands of England. While the study concentrated on those migrants coming here on the *Castel Felice* in the 1960s the survey attracted responses from a few who came on other ships or by plane. One participant came in 1947, one in 1951, three in 1957 and three in the 1970s. One was a backpacker who stayed and another came in the 1960s as part of a round the world tour and then decided to migrate later. Some of the participants had first migrated to the eastern states of Australia but later settled in Western Australia. At that time all British migrants travelling by sea landed first at Fremantle, so all ship borne participants had experienced a similar route here and comparable conditions. The few participants first going to the eastern states seem to have found work more easily, but their experience in other ways, especially in government hostels, and the difficulty in finding suitable rental accommodation, resembled that of the migrants who had chosen to stay in Western Australia.

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\(^7\) Victor Humphries, arr. Nov/Dec 1966, Survey 34.
The main reasons given by the respondents for coming to Australia did not change greatly over the decade covered by the study. Most were coming for a better life. Many came to be reunited with friends and relatives who were already settled in Western Australia, however, in keeping with the changing policy of promotion of the Australian way of life, more people in the later years say they came for the ‘weather’. The Lonnie Scheme and advertisements for jobs offered by the Western Australian Employers Federation attracted a few of the participants, though all my respondents say they were in full-time work when they made the decision to emigrate. Other reasons included health problems and racially motivated trouble in the United Kingdom at the time. A few voiced their fears of the ‘cold war’ and threat of nuclear proliferation. Extended families, aunts, uncles and grandparents came with one or two of my respondents. Some of the respondents had been sponsored by various organisations who found them accommodation and work on arrival. A few had served in the armed forces and found it difficult to settle back into civilian life, and some had known Australians whilst in the services and this had persuaded them to migrate. In most cases the husband made the decision, the children were sometimes consulted but often they were just brought along having no say in the move. The majority were sponsored by federal or state governments and initially housed in one of the migrant hostels.

Although the drive to attract migrants was generally the prerogative of the federal government, the states were also active in recruiting. The Lonnie Scheme, for example, was an initiative of the Western Australian government in the early 1960s to encourage migrants to this state. Many participants said they saw advertisements in newspapers, applied to migrate and then were interviewed, had medicals and waited to be accepted. The waiting time could be very short—two to three weeks—or in some cases considerably longer, and in one case two years. The migrants had to settle their affairs in Britain, sell their homes, finalise work contacts, even in some cases wait for babies to be born or reach the age of three months. They also had to deal with the sometimes negative reactions of friends and relatives before
making the final move to Southampton docks, or to the airport.

After often emotional goodbyes, many were surprised at the relatively small size of the *Castel Felice* and her sister ships. The idea of a leisure cruise on a luxury-liner often paled when they found they were on a ship specialising in migrant travel. People were packed into cabins to make the most economical use of the ship’s accommodation. Families and even young married couples were separated, women in one cabin, men in another. It was unfortunate that the dormitory style cabins were often in the lowest part of the ship. The respondents found sharing toilet and bathing facilities, or washing and drying clothes in such circumstances difficult. All meals, except for breakfast, were served at separate times for children and adults and although there were a number of complaints, generally the food was adequate and the menus varied. Entertainment included cinemas, dances, a pool and deck games. A school of sorts was offered on some voyages with the lessons being run by willing passengers. A number enjoyed the ‘cheap grog’. There were rough seas in different parts of the voyage. Childhood diseases such as measles and chickenpox, as well as travel sickness, caused many adults and children to visit the ship’s hospital. Others, especially the teenagers, seem to have enjoyed a wonderful time. Children, often with little supervision, had the run of the ship.

Ports of call varied. In the early 1960s the voyage was through the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, but by the middle of 1967 this route was closed during the Suez blockade. The respondents who came by the Mediterranean route often toured Egypt as the ship sailed through the Canal. The respondents spoke of the traders who beset the ships in their small boats, and also of their surprise at the impoverished conditions in some of these ports of call. Many say they were afraid to leave the boat when confronted by armed soldiers. Those passengers who sailed via the Canary Isles seemed to have a happier time ashore, although they were shocked by conditions in Cape Town where apartheid was still in operation.

Migrants who came by ship experienced a voyage of four to five weeks, those who arrived by
plane did so in about 36 hours.

The migrants who had sought better weather were surprised when they arrived in Australia and found extreme heat or cold rain. Most of the respondents went to the government migrant reception centres at Point Walter, Graylands, or Noalimba, and to similar accommodation in the eastern states. These hostels were the focus of much dissatisfaction. The most frequent complaint concerned the lack of public transport from the centres to places of employment, although the dilapidated state of some of the accommodation also raised comment. Those who had been sponsored under the Fairbridge scheme had often not fully understood the terms of the agreement and were upset to be separated from their children. Many of the respondents had to learn to drive and buy a vehicle so they could go to work.

I was surprised by the variety of professions and trades my participants’ say they brought to Australia; over 53 different skills were reported. These included a veterinarian, a lay minister with the Methodist Church and an academic taking up a position with the University of Western Australia. While most of the women were caring for children, many had held professional positions in the United Kingdom. Although they had been assured by eager officials that they were urgently needed some of my respondents found their work skills were of little use in Western Australia. Finding jobs for those over 40 years was difficult and women, like migrants of other nationalities, found it even harder to gain employment.

The respondents say it was not like living in Britain; most were surprised to find the food, the customs and, in some cases, even the language different. Many were shocked to find they were not particularly welcome. The lowly position of women in Australia in the 1960s provoked much comment. Children especially were disappointed by the lack of wildlife; many of them expected to see kangaroos and koalas on the streets, and a few expected to ride horses to school. The neighbourhood in which the migrants settled also caused concern. While some were very pleased to find people who had been on the ship—or other English migrants—living next-door, others seemed disappointed not to have Australian
neighbours. Housing was the source of a great deal of disappointment. Chip heaters, wood stoves, toilets at the end of the garden and septic sewerage systems were below the expectations of people used to ‘electric everything’ and deep sewerage. Those who moved into the ‘spec’ homes built by the realty companies often found they were in an isolated community with little public transport or other amenities and they still had septic sewerage.

The comfortable life my respondents said they enjoyed in the United Kingdom was in some cases replaced by job insecurity, shoddy accommodation, heat, mosquitos, flies and sand. They had not imagined they would be unwelcome and derided as ‘Pommy Bastards’. Despite this most of the respondents to this survey seem to have settled quite happily in Western Australia although a few returned to the British Isles at some time for a holiday or a short term stay. Many of their children have also returned on working holidays. Some of the families have split up; there have been divorces, remarriages and deaths, and some did return to live permanently in the United Kingdom. While this thesis concentrates on those migrants that have settled in Australia it is useful to see why some returned.

**Going Home**
Many migrants would have returned home to Britain within the first two years if they could have afforded to do so—returning early would require them to repay the full cost of their outward fare—and Hammerton suggests that a few who returned for a short stay to alleviate homesickness often did not come back to Australia. Though most of my participants conclude in retrospect that the migration to Australia was a positive experience, many were unhappy with conditions they experienced on arrival. Such grievances provoked a number of migrants to return to their countries of origin. Others returned because of family circumstances compelled them to do so though they would have preferred to remain here. Accurate statistics are difficult to collate as dissatisfied migrants are not listed as a separate

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8 Hammerton and Thomson, p. 279.
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entity in the figures of people travelling from Australia\textsuperscript{9}, but a figure of 25\% is generally accepted.\textsuperscript{10}

Appleyard lists a number of personal factors that were involved in the decision to return, including homesickness and changing family relationships. Some he concluded had just ‘made a mistake in coming’.\textsuperscript{11} Sherington suggests that advances in air travel in the late 1960s made it easier for people to return to their country of origin, for visits or for permanent re-settlement. This was enhanced by the improved economic circumstances in both the United Kingdom and Europe in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{12} Richardson suggests that if a wife was unable to settle this could, in turn upset the husband. ‘It is usually because they did not find what they were looking for or discovered a loss of something they had not previously appreciated’.\textsuperscript{13} Murphy saw other reasons including; inability to handle basic changes in life style, tragedy, bad luck’.\textsuperscript{14} Homesickness was a problem for many women in particular who were separated from their support systems in the United Kingdom and were housed in accommodation they found substandard.\textsuperscript{15}

My respondents gave many instances which provoked disillusionment on arrival. Some have bitter memories of being labelled a ‘whingeing Pom’. In an article in the Western Australian \textit{Sunday Times} in 1997 Gerrie says more than 150,000 disillusioned Poms returned home, ‘many before their two years were up’. One of her interviewees is reported as saying:

We thought we were coming to paradise. They kept pushing the fact that Australia was a land of milk and honey. But what looked as lush and green as England on film was a lot hotter and drier on the land. The house was something else—only two bedrooms for the 11 of us. Weatherboard—full of ants, you could poke your finger through the wall. The house we had in England was big and beautiful.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{9} Andrew Hassam, ‘The Bring Out a Briton Campaign of 1957 and British Migration to Australia in the 1950s, \textit{History Compass}, vol. 5 no. 10, 2007, p. 10
\textsuperscript{13} Alan Richardson, ‘British immigrants in Western Australia: Study of British migrants in Medina’, in. Price \textit{The study of Immigrants in Australia: Proceedings of a conference on immigration research convened by the Dept. of Demography}, Australian National University, Canberra, 1960, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{14} Brian Murphy, \textit{The Other Australia: Experiences of migration}, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1993, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{15} James Jupp, \textit{Arrivals and Departures}, Cheshire Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1966, p. 112.
However, it would appear even the English had little sympathy for some ‘whingeing Poms’. During my research at the National Archives I found a letter with an attached newspaper cutting published in The People in England on 29 July 1962. It told of a family who had immigrated to Melbourne in 1956 and were unable to settle. The mother stowed away on board an ocean-going liner with her eleven children in an attempt to get back to England; or perhaps the attempt was meant to attract public sympathy—a stowaway with so many children would have found it hard to keep a low profile. They were discovered and off-loaded in Adelaide. A number of the children in the family were working, but not the father. After six years in Australia, they managed to save enough money to buy their tickets back to England. Michael Dale from the People newspaper met them at the docks and was able to take them to a house in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire, which had been offered to them rent free for five years. The family refused to live in what they considered to be substandard accommodation despite the offer of help by professionals to renovate the house. The reporter concluded, ‘They just don’t know when they are well off’.

Alistair Thomson argues that the experience of the ‘Ten Pound Poms’ who returned to the United Kingdom has been largely unrecorded until recently. He compiled accounts from over 250 British migrants, some archived at the University of Sussex in England together with over 1,300 accounts held at La Trobe University, Melbourne. He with Jim Hammerton wrote Ten Pound Poms: Australia’s invisible migrants, in which they discussed the range of causes behind the discontented migrant. Some returned, they argued, because they had only ever intended to stay two years. There were people who had never really wanted to emigrate, many who were homesick and those who returned because of family responsibilities. Homesickness was a problem for many women in particular who were separated from their support systems in the United Kingdom and were often housed in accommodation they found

17 National Archives of Australia, Department of Immigration, K403/3–W59/594, Michael Dale, ‘Dad’s asking the moon: Australia will be glad to see the back of the Green family…and no wonder, People, London, 29 July 1962. Page not clear.
substandard. Hammerton prepared two tables, one listing the factors which he found influenced the decision to emigrate and another which influenced the decision to return to Britain. These tables reflect the responses of the participants to my study:

**Left, below:** Factors cited by Hammerton having influenced the decision of Britons to migrate to Australia, 1945 – 1970s.

**Right, below:** Factors which influenced the return of British migrants to the United Kingdom, of those who had migrated in the same period.

In the responses to my survey, the decisions and motivations and the reason for leaving Australia, often matched the findings of these authors. Participants were horrified by the conditions in the migrant hostels and others by the unexpected heat and insects. Few said they never wanted to emigrate. Though some of my participants came because it was a family decision into which they had no input, these migrants, generally, settled happily.

Some of my participants returned because of marital breakdowns, deaths and family

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20 Hammerton and Thomson, p. 65.
21 Hammerton and Thomson, p. 277.
responsibilities. One never wanted to grow old and die in Australia, and another complained of racial attitudes in Australia.\(^{23}\) Most of my participants, whether they had stayed in Australia or returned, experienced feelings of homesickness. Many still refer to Britain as ‘home’, though they have lived in Western Australia for many years. One explained, ‘When I am here I call England “home”, but when I am in England I call Australia “home”’.\(^{24}\) The idea of being homesick was often dismissed as being an unimportant ‘female problem’; in the male it was presented as a physical or emotional breakdown related to the inability of the breadwinner to achieve the aims he expected.\(^{25}\) Hammerton found that homesickness could appear after many years, even much later in life, when people retire and express a ‘growing desire to live out their lives in Britain’.\(^{26}\)

Some of my participants were ‘boomerang migrants’ returning to Britain more than once before finally settled in Western Australia. One returned to marry the ‘girl he had left behind’ and bring her back to Australia,\(^{27}\) while another went back because she missed her ‘closest family members’, but then found she missed friends and family here more.\(^{28}\) The Webers say their return to England was a costly mistake.\(^{29}\) One woman returned to England after her husband died but returned to Australia within a year.\(^{30}\) Many of the respondents said they would have gone back straight away if they had had the money, but never again considered it seriously once they had settled. Most agree that though they are now happy Australians; ‘We still love England’.\(^{31}\)

Although this thesis is primarily about those migrants who made the decision to stay in Western Australia it must be acknowledged that some did not. As part of the research I received 6 surveys completed by people who have now made Britain their home. Some had

\(^{24}\) Name withheld, arr. Nov. 1963, Survey 7.
\(^{25}\) Hammerton and Thomson, pp. 285, 289.
\(^{26}\) Hammerton and Thomson, p. 289.
\(^{27}\) Alan Huckins, arr. Apr/May 1967, Survey 64.
\(^{30}\) Name withheld, arr. Dec. 1964, Survey 50.
\(^{31}\) Name withheld, arr. Nov. 1966, Survey 32.
decided to return almost immediately but for others the decision was made much later. Chris Moore returned to England after 31 years in Australia. He says the main reason was because of his ‘ageing mother, and to allow children to get to know her and their UK family’. His wife, Clare, added this rider:

Can I please add that, compared with the rest of the family and friends that I have met in all the times we have been coming back to England, Chris has a much broader understanding of the world and its people. He is more welcoming and accepting—he really likes the Australian idea of giving everyone a go and accepting them for themselves. I think if he had stayed in Bromborough he would be similar to his siblings—fairly narrow minded and set in their ways—old before their time—not very adventurous and distrustful of outsiders (anyone who lives outside the Wirral). He is the middle child and evidently always a bit of a larrikin—a perfect Australian. He still does not fit into his family—only now it doesn’t seem to bother him. Living in Kent is so different from up north, we would never have stayed so long if we moved back to his old family surroundings, it would have swallowed us up and spat us out. We will one day go back to Australia, perhaps when our girls have settled.33

But the Collyer family decided two weeks after arriving in Australia that they wanted to go home. They stayed here for two years and one day. They did not like the conditions at the hostel, though they stayed there for the whole time. Bothered by the heat and the flies, they thought Australia was ‘10–15 years behind the times’ and were disappointed because they thought their two boys (aged 12 years and 13 years) would not be able to find apprenticeships and might be called up to serve in Vietnam.34 Others who could not ‘stand the summers’ were the family of Thomas Bowles.35 Another confessed that ‘After a month we realised we missed things like the green countryside in England. . . .Almost constant heat in WA was too much.’ Although they now call England home they have returned to Australia six times since 1970. Eunice Woods admitted ‘We will never regret the time we had in Australia’.36 Nobby Clarke knew ‘it was a big mistake in leaving Australia. I look back with great fondness and I am glad I had the opportunity on being in such a wonderful country’. But his wife was ‘very

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disappointed with the whole thing as she felt ‘let down’. Eileen Perrins with her husband first travelled overland by motor cycle and sidecar from Luton (England) to Pakistan, then by train to India, plane to Bangkok and Perth. They enjoyed the sunshine and outdoor life here so after the visa expired they applied to emigrate. On arrival they met up with friends they had known while staying here on their visa. They had jobs waiting for them in a mining laboratory where they had worked previously. She says she left Australia the second time mainly because she wanted her children to meet their relatives, but she also ‘disliked the racist attitudes of many white Australians and the overpowering consumerism’. Nevertheless she says she and her children are all Australian citizens and they have returned here on holiday on a couple of occasions. She finishes by saying, ‘it will always have a profound influence on us.’ Another confessed ‘I never wanted to grow old and die there’.

The reasons for a migrant’s return are probably far more complex than those outlined in my stories. It would appear that some had difficulty in settling back into life in Britain when they returned, but still stayed there. While I would have preferred to obtain more responses from ‘returnees’ to the United Kingdom, I was fortunate that the responses I did receive were so disparate. However it was noted that those who stayed in Australia often wrote of Britain as ‘home’ though they have no intention of living there.

**Conclusion**

For the insight it offers into the British migrant experience my study resembles the findings of Peters for the Dutch and other Europeans and Baldassar on the Italian migrant. Chetkovich has written on the ‘new’ Irish, covering a later period in the history of migration to Western Australia. My work extends that of other academics, but it concerns the British migrants of the 1960s who have rarely been the subject of such studies. Hammerton and Thomson have written a more general story of the ‘invisible migrants’ and my work parallels their

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37 Clarke, arr. Apr. 1967, Survey 104.
contribution to a large extent while concentrating on those 1960s British migrants who came to Western Australia, by boat. A major contribution by Hammerton and Thomson was the story of those migrants who returned to live in Britain.

For the majority of the respondents to this study the dream of a better life was met as they settled in Western Australia. They are now Australian citizens, even some of those who now live permanently in the United Kingdom. Some have retained dual Australian and United Kingdom citizenship. In the long term most migrants found that the reality of life in Australia was as good as or even better than, they had expected, and despite early struggles had adopted what they considered to be an Australian way of life. The study also shows that many of the British migrants had very good reasons to complain and were unfairly labelled as ‘whingers’. However, my study has also revealed that, despite many British migrants of the 1960s being disappointed in the difference between the expectations of their new life in Australia and the conditions that they found on arrival, these early grievances disappeared as they became more settled. They have lived full, productive and successful lives here and truly regard themselves now as Australian citizens.

There are areas of research that justify further investigation. Jupp says research needs to be carried out on the location of the promotional materials that were available to British migrants in the 1960s. Of some social and historical interest would be a study of the reasons why migrants came to Western Australia after initially settling in other states, as 17 of my respondents had done. After reading many authors on feminism, and the changing status of women in Australia, I believe that research into the effect that British migrant women may have had on the advancement of women’s rights would be interesting. Of interest to me and a possible area for further is the reason British migrants still keep coming to Australia even though the £10 assistance scheme finished in 1972. Now they are no longer the most sought after but must compete with other nationalities to become Australian citizens.