

*In A Sunburned Country*, by Bill Bryson  
Broadway Books, 2000, 304 pgs

Review by David Eaton Mauk

This book is a fun, humorous account of traveling through Australia by New Hampshire writer, Bill Bryson. It will lure the reader to look at Australia in a whole new light. We all know the island continent is big. Bryson presents entertaining versions of what that really entails.

He does this, as those who have previously encountered his work know, through a self-depreciating wit and iconoclastic manner of finding ways of turning ordinary mishaps into entertaining adventures. We read about how Australia's natural world is capable of inflicting pain and death to unwary humans. The country's spaciousness is stretched out before us as it was to the author in his drive across the barren outback. Another theme is how this distant nation is removed from everyday thinking, historical renderings, and even the rest of the world's evolutionary legacies. Bryson writes, *"This is a country that loses a prime minister and that is so vast and empty that a band of amateur enthusiasts could conceivably set off the world's first non-governmental atomic bomb on its mainland and almost four years would pass before anyone noticed. Clearly this is a place worth getting to know."*

Many will recall that early Australia is where European criminals were incarcerated over a century ago. The book fills in one's knowledge about the continent's other early history. There are some oddities found here that will bring more than a few laughs and disbelieving shakes of the head to readers. This is not a conventional country. Bryson's unique style captures it well.

Like his superb volume, *A Walk In The Woods*, relating the tribulations and triumphs of his hike along the Appalachian Trail, *In A Sunburned Country* details specific episodes in the author's journey. Readers have many choices in finding their own favorites. Among mine were the initial chapters on the lethal aspects of the animal and plant kingdoms. This topic is introduced early in the book. *"As you can imagine, I was particularly attracted to all those things that might hurt me, which in an Australian context is practically everything. It really is the most extraordinary lethal country. Naturally they play down the fact that every time you set your feet on the floor something is likely to jump out and seize an ankle. Thus my guidebook blandly observed that "only" fourteen species of Australian snakes are seriously lethal..."* Before the topic is exhausted, we are told many stories of what happens to the unsuspecting, and how terrified Bryson is to actually inhabit an area that may contain any of these unusual threats.

Two other favorite accounts in the book involved the author's accommodations, one on the "it can't get any worse than this" side of things, and the other a one-of-a-kind, feel-good experience. Each of these episodes occurred in the Australian outback, a place vividly described as vast, empty and isolated. The former took place in Darwin, when looking and eventually finding for the All Seasons Frontier Hotel. The scene is set by the words, *"Personally I feel that the Territorians should not be permitted to take full part in national affairs until they get friendlier hotel staff in Darwin."* We are then taken on a wild ride through the streets and hotels of this city in the Northwest Territories.

The other memorable hotel experience took place in the desolate town of Daly Waters, 370 miles from Darwin and 570 miles from Alice Springs off the Stuart Highway, where the temperature that day pushed 110 degrees. This spot on the map is also home to the Stuart Tree, commemorating one of Australia's many unlucky explorers. This explanation surrounding this circumstance sets off a remarkable string of events for the town, written in classic Bryson hyperbole.

Finally the reader is given a destination and imagery that is the visual treat of the book. The Tree Top Walk sounds as exhilarating as it must be breath-taking. Its 2,000 foot length stretches 120 feet above the ground among beautiful tingle trees. A fitting image of the "preposterously outsized country" as presented in this enjoyable travel book offering a different view of the land down-under.