



Jenny Sinclair

## The circumstances in which they come

'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.'

*John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia, 6 December 2001.*

**R**iding my bike down Canning Street, Carlton, heading for the towers of the city, I cross paths with a woman wearing a hijab: African-born, trailing three beautiful round-eyed, glossy-skinned children behind her. Her billowing red robe waves at me as I pass; the children are primary coloured in their Western T-shirts and shorts.

She's like those stick-on characters that came with paper history dioramas when I was a child: soldiers for battlefields, ballet dancers for theatres, bearded pantaloon-wearing gentlemen for Elizabethan England. Her background—a strip of terrace houses and up-on-stilts public housing—is wrong. She's a character made for another place, through a thousand generations. And it's just random cruel luck that has forced her to be the one who left and came to Melbourne.

I think about her as I push the bike through the hot air up the hill towards Lygon Street. How many years her mother's and her father's family had lived in that place she's left; how certain, rooted in place they might have been (and I know I could be romanticising, they may have been travellers, traders, adventurers within Africa). I think about the uncertainty of beginning again.

I think about where I began. I have no traditional claim to the land I stand on, but I have nowhere else to go. I stand in the middle.

John Howard, it seems to me, would like to resolve the problem for people like me by dismissing anything that appears to him to put on a 'black armband', to regret, to admit that someone had to lose out in the deal, and did.

Lately, I've been digging up the family tree: sifting through online registry records, drawing up my own map of the past, looking for beginnings.

The picture I've drawn would please John Howard immensely—not a single arrival after 1900—but I reject, I reject. I'm a mongrel. In my homogenous diversity of origin, I am Australian, because that's the only certainty.

My ancestors all came here by boat, rocked and creaked their way to a place that wasn't theirs, in many senses. And who knows what their senses made of it: coming from Surrey, from Norfolk, from the north of Scotland and the metropolitan heart of London, to a dry and dusty place of heat, fire and frost. I imagine it was only the distance travelled that prevented them returning home again the instant they laid eyes on Australia.

And once here, what? Association with other refugees: from life in the old United Kingdom; from poverty, starvation, persecution; from homes where they were one of ten or twenty children; from parents who brought them to the goldfields as teenagers, saw them married off, then returned to England, never to see them again. Then, almost instantly, children were born—new Australians? Some are neither here nor there; the simple phrase 'born at sea' on a certificate carrying an ocean

of uncertainty about where a young woman might belong.

With each generation, the number of names, dates, places on my list doubles. There are so many of them. Maybe, I hope, one Eliza Jackson, mother of Eliza Hodgens, will turn out to be the same woman who, at nineteen, was convicted in the Old Bailey in 1830 of stealing a watch and sentenced to transportation.

Why do I hope to have a thief in the family? Because it's better than a soldier? Given a choice between the jailer and the jailee, is it better to be the prisoner?

Maybe it's the goldminer in me—and there was at least one, in that brachiate tangle of ancestry—but the more I dig, the deeper I go, and the more I want to dig. My Australian ancestry is relentlessly nineteenth century and English-speaking; I find no migrants struggling over barriers of language and religion; I have none of the land's original inhabitants to help me stake my claim. The Sinclair-Hogg-Dunn-Thompson-Cheesley-Flegg-Jackson-Halifax-Coleman-Kerr-Smee-Andrews-Davidson-Hodgins-Hodgens-Harbor-Mason-Finch family tree: on and on it goes, with only one name from anywhere but the British Isles: Marie Yarkofsky, a girl of sixteen, her parents refugees from some pogrom or other, a Jew who married a butcher from Preston. And surely everyone's allowed one mistake.

The birth and marriage—places listed on the certificates that I'm hunting down, pulling in over the internet, are scattered across Victoria: the now-ghost-town of Indigo Creek, the smaller hamlets around the shining golden hub of Ballarat, the old suburbs of Melbourne—Pahran, Northcote—the city itself. If the trail fades and the records fail—in London, in Cornwall, in New South Wales' Hunter Valley—I call that a beginning, as far as I can go.

The network of places joins up in my mind, a web of roads travelled and events marking moments in time.

My great-great-grandfather's jewellery shop in Main Road, Ballarat, is gone; its ghost is shot through with car after car sweeping down the bypass they built around the shopping mall.

He had a place here: a name, an obituary in the local paper when he died. But others had the most tenuous hold, like my sixteen-year-old great-grandmother Marie, a 'lady', according to the documentation, who married a butcher from Preston. She was married in Melbourne, but born in Dunedin, New Zealand, of Polish parents. The cursory copperplate scratchings on the page offer no answers to the questions: Where were her parents? Why was she married so young, so far from

home? How did she come into the care, if that's what it was, of the guardian, name of Dobbin, who signed her away?

Eventually, I'm told by older folk, she took the high road to Hawaii. For that destination there is no explanation either.

I wonder about the political meaning of my research. Having found that I come from what once would have been called pioneer stock, should I be proud or ashamed of what may have been done in my name, for their children and their children's children? Would it have been better to spring from newcomers than such unreconstructed colonials? I suspect it's people like me John Howard means when he says 'we decide who comes here' but I don't want to be part of his 'we'.

I side with the black armbands, the sorry people, the ones who admit that harm was done, is being done, and would like, in their incoherent, possibly ineffectual way, to make things better. At least to try.

Our views—there is no single view—are not negative. They're realist. They struggle with what is, what must be addressed. I'd rather wear a black armband to remind me of the past and future than be part of a whitewash over rotting foundations. In the end, it will be the artists and writers, the historians and truth-tellers with black armbands, who help heal the soul of this nation.

Growing up in Ballarat, a story went around amongst us teenagers that there was a curse on the town. If you were born there, there you would die. I was born in a shiny modern hospital in Melbourne, transported to Ballarat in my crib. I thought I was immune to the curse.

That was before I learned about my great-great-grandparents, married at Beaufort, just outside Ballarat, before I scaled the other side of the tree, to find my father's mother's family scattered around the northern farming districts, in towns and on dates that suggest gold had something to do with it, too. I wonder, who chose them to come here? The answer, of course, is no one: they chose to come.

Now, I think that Central Victoria—perhaps not Ballarat itself, but some small old town not far away, across the worn-down landscape of ancient weathered volcanos—is where I'd like to die, magpies carolling outside the walls of my room as I drift off to sleep.

Maybe that's the real test of who you are: not where you are born at random, but where you choose to die.

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Jenny Sinclair is a Melbourne writer and journalist. Since 2005 her fiction has appeared in various forums, including *Best Australian stories 2006*, *Island* and *Verandah*. She was formerly a reporter for *The Age* and *The Melbourne Times*. She lives in inner Melbourne with her husband and her son, who is three and has already learned to share and to say 'sorry' when he hurts someone.

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