Crowning Glory: Australians celebrating London in the 1950s

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Abstract

In 1951, Australians were streaming to London in unprecedented numbers, many of them intent on seeing the city in its year of symbolic rebirth, as it paraded the Festival of Britain. By the middle of that year there were reports that 25,000 Australians were in England for the Festival, and that another 12,000 were expected within months. The Festival, at its headquarters on the south bank of the Thames and events elsewhere, turned London into a focus of national renewal. An Australian reporter was delighted by this public face: ‘London is looking really lovely and festive,’ he wrote. ‘I'm glad I arrived in time to see it before she put on her best clothes. . . Flags and bunting, flowers and decorations are everywhere.’

Australian accounts of the Festival of Britain and the later Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II reflect a fascination with the pageantry and display of ‘50s London. Both events featured in travel narratives of the time, often revealing writers’ ambivalence about the extent to which they felt a sense of belonging, or subjection, to the spectacle. Were Australian travellers intent on inserting themselves – or standing outside – the celebratory tableaux of Festival and Coronation on London’s streets? Did their accounts reflect established narratives of Empire London that had been sustained by generations of travellers before, and were being reinvigorated by Menzies? Or were they intent on developing a critical regard for the passing pageant? This paper will consider the Australian audiences for these self-conscious performances of Britishness. Both the Festival and Coronation were expressly regenerative for a society still straitened by its experiences in war. They were also choreographed drawcards for tourist consumers, travelling Australians among them.