



Aussie enlightenment

The day after George arrived in Australia he travelled by car with his newly adopted family, back to their home in Ballarat, a small provincial city in the hills, two hour's drive from the pick-up point in Melbourne. Travelling by car through the sprawling city suburbs and then across wide-stretching plains before climbing through forested hills, was a revelation for the young Cornishman. He was stunned by the differences: the roads, the houses, the trees, the land itself; a multitude of opposites compared to where he had come from!

But despite the many contrasting elements, the disparities on that second day did not extend to weather, for after the bright magenta sky and warm winter sunshine on arrival the next day was dismal and dreary; something akin to the land he had left in his wake. Up until that point George had tended to believe the illusion that *the land down under* was all about: hot sun, warm seas and pounding surf. He was about to discover that this indeed was an illusion; it was certainly not the case all year round anyway ... least of all in the frigid winter world of Ballarat.

Rugged up in woollen balaklava and leather gloves, he began his daily routine on a bike, peddling to school through the frosty mornings of a *Ballarat* winter. The nose-numbing cold came as a rude awakening, at times seeming to surpass the freezing conditions in faraway Cornwall: the place he had escaped from a couple of months before. But after a few weeks, the frost on his fingers seemed well worth it, as he found himself undergoing a miraculous transformation from wayward schoolboy, wandering aimlessly off the rails in Britain, to role-model for the classroom in Australia.

An education of sorts

What really caught him off guard was the incredible behaviour of students at his new school; a negative aspect which seemed almost diametrically opposed to his own positive transformation. Their sheer daring startled him; it was on a level he had never witnessed before. If it had been England, he would have been over the moon and in the thick of it; probably leading the parade. But now, in a new land and with a newly formed maturity, he was disturbed by what he saw as insubordination in the extreme, which subjected his new (and now favourite) geography teacher to mental torture and absolute ridicule. This was a man whom George, in a short space of time, had come to respect: a tall burly square-jawed fellow, with greying crew-cut fashioned into a flat-top, and grey suit to match: a person considered by many as a genial giant.

The boy's exploits included dropping bricks from an upstairs dormitory, into a metal dustbin, hidden behind a cupboard at the rear of the classroom, with a noise equal to an exploding grenade. Then, one particularly fearless lad hid in a box-like teacher's desk at the front of the class, swearing loudly each time the teacher tried to speak. It was an amazingly brave act, designed to send a vulnerable teacher crazy! This was before *Monty Python*, but the tortured teacher could well have been *John Cleese*, bounding out of the door to the class along the corridor, searching for the offending pupil (as the teacher actually did in reality) ... while *Michael Palin* crawls out of the box and scampers back to his seat, a picture of innocence to greet their returning mentor.

The whole class also used a regular, well-practiced method, of producing a combined humming noise, accompanied by stamping feet, whenever the teacher turned his back, then stopped the noise abruptly when he turned to see where the invasive racket was coming from. They sensed this teacher did not know how to keep order, and they were out to make the most of it.

“Stop this noise at once!” the man would shout (though by then there was complete silence). *“If you don’t, the whole class will spend time in detention!”* Then as soon as he turned back to the board, the humming, stamping noise, would start up again.

During his rebellious school days in England, George had never been involved in anything that came near to this. The class had surpassed any boundary of reason. Their aim was to destroy this teacher, a person they saw as vulnerable.

One day, the chief pranksters decided to up the ante. For the final assault – and before their victim entered the class for the first lesson of the day - several boys had worked tirelessly to document all over the large blackboard, in multi-coloured chalk, what they titled *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*. When the focus of their attention finally appeared - he immediately saw the board, and flew into an uncontrollable rage, fueled by the pent-up anger accumulated from all the previous bits of bad behaviour thrown at him by this class. It was a grave insult that they had now denigrated his beloved England, the country he had fought for in World War Two. But it was of course an unbridled success for those boys who had planned the whole thing like a military operation. This dedicated and affable Englishman walked out of the school that day, never to return.

The place was a Church of England affiliated boy’s school, designed by the elite, for the elite. Australia prided itself on having such schools for their landed gentry, which mirrored – and in select cases almost eclipsed - the lofty towers and manicured quadrangles of the *old country*. When student George arrived in the 60s, the nouveau-riche were beginning to gate-crash the party, such as Jackson (the boy inside the teacher’s desk) the only son of *Whelan the Wrecker*, a local scrap-metal dealer. At about

the same time, Prince Charles, heir to the British throne, was in residence at *Timbertop*, a rural enclave attached to the most exclusive school of all: *Geelong Grammar*.

And then there was *Spense* (when pronounced slowly and with intent, the name even sounded a bit suspect) a forties-something gent, with receding hair, white puffy cheeks and unusually reddish lips, who would cruise around the vicinity of the Ballarat school in a sleek white car, offering to give lifts and buy sweets. In today's world he would be on some sort of community register, but back in those more innocent days he was passed off as a bit of a *weirdo*, whom the most daring of boys loved to torment.

"Hey Spense," they would say, surrounding the car. "Can we come with you today dear? You never know what we might give you ... as long as you give us something in return." It was always a group which confronted him, and George assumed that all Mr Spense got out of it, was the satisfaction of being near a bunch of pubescent males.

This short stint of school life – it lasted only about six months – formed a speedy introduction to Australian culture and customs for George; it was something of an eye-opener and the starting point for more than thirty years in Australia. It also came as welcome relief from the victimization and oppression he had been subjected to within the English school system, so that while this errant schoolboy had failed miserably in the UK, he responded with flying colours and top marks in his newly adopted land. In terms of education principles, there was a lot to be drawn from this example.

Boys-to-men: a defining principle

If George thought his first school of learning in Australia was something of a no-holds-barred establishment, he was in for an even bigger shock, when he moved to college level early the following year. There, the staff and students - all males - contrived to launch a *boys-to-men* initiative, which at times exceeded all acceptable norms of what might be termed tertiary education. As example, inauguration of the toughening-up policy and induction into the fraternity, consisted of an out-of-control drinking bash at a lecturer's private house. At the end of this beer and vomit-sodden evening, George and many other new recruits were unceremoniously loaded onto a pick-up truck – or *ute*, as

commonly referred to in that part of the world - and driven back to be dumped at the college. This was like manna-from-heaven for the young man from England, who from the age of fourteen, had grown up getting used to drunken nights as a part of his insubordinate days in Cornwall.

On a later occasion, during a two-week booze-tour of farms up and down the East Coast of Australia – also part of the *boys-to-men* experiment – he was sitting around the dying embers of a campfire, with a few others, at about two in the morning, after consuming copious quantities of lager. They were each competing to find a new, even-dirtier ditty to sing, when the principal of the college was presented, spread-eagled in a wheelbarrow, bare chested, and with, for some seemingly humorous reason, an enormous Barramundi fish sticking out of his belt. This caused uproarious laughter amongst the onlookers ... though the principal had already passed out and was oblivious to it all.

By this stage George was still only 17, his attendance at school and initiation into college, all happening within his first year *down under*. During this time, he had managed to gate-crash establishments generally reserved for the privileged few. The school was one such place, but the tertiary college was perhaps the best example - a newly established, privately-run, agricultural education institution – which catered for the well-off sons of rich landowners: often prominent people, well connected to the corridors of power. George himself hailed from a small 50-acre dairy farm in the south-west of England, but his new mates were heirs to thousands of acres of land that grew beef, sheep, and wheat, in the wealthier parts of Australia.

The young man from the *motherland* was indeed something of a stand-out oddity, with his *Beatles*-inspired hairdo and broad west-country accent (soon to be replaced by a much more nasal, Aussie twang). His appearance on the role-call of what was only the second year's intake for this college for the well-connected, also seemed quite timely, as if he was the youthful courier of *Beatlemania* and sixties swinging London, parachuting in as a messenger of good tidings, from *Carnaby Street* to the colonies. This culminated with him leading a group of hand-picked collegemates, to attend an iconic *Beatles*

concert in Melbourne; travelling along the then super-modern highway, to *The Big Smoke* - as the city was commonly referred to - the exalted passenger in a friend's very trendy, top-down MG-TF, at speeds approaching 100 miles per hour. Luckily there were no speed cameras back in those heady days, and his silver-spooned mate from the back-blocks of Queensland was a surprisingly competent driver.

From the start he was called *Pom*. The name was a truncated version of the word *Pommy*, the Aussie rhyming slang for *Tommy*: a nickname for British soldiers in the First World War, often offered up as an affectionate term, bearing no malice, and George accepted it in the same vein. Decades later when he attended a re-union of grey-haired college mates and was introduced by his real name, some of them looked a bit bemused, until one shouted out:

... "Oh, of course, I remember, it's 'Pom! Great to see you again old cobber."

On one long summer break between college years, George was given a farm *placement* on a rural block, that whilst only a couple of hundred miles East of the sprawling Melbourne metropolis, was in fact so remote it could have been in the middle of the Simpson Desert! The farm was set in a mountainous enclave: a giant cul-de-sac, almost completely surrounded by a vast swathe of native bush. The once-a-month shopping expedition meant a 50-mile journey to the nearest town, way down on the coastal flats of this area called *East Gippsland*. It turned out to be a fantastic place for a working holiday, with vast expanses of steep, pastured fields (or paddocks as they were known) bordering native bushland, and as many koalas, cockatoos, snakes and *roos*, as the numbers of Angus beef and Polwarth sheep, under his charge. Our young intern from college – still only just 18 months out from English schooldays - learnt to ride a horse, drive a car, build a fence, and castrate burgeoning fat lambs with his teeth ... along with a host of other farm-based skills.

This secondment also had a couple of very attractive advantages, namely two teenage daughters, who struck George as a gift from the Gods, when he went with his boss - their father - to collect them from an elite boarding school on the outskirts of the city.

Then, as a testosterone-inspired teenager, he would lay awake each night, dreaming of the young ladies in the next-door bedroom; but come the dawn, he never really managed to summon the courage to turn night-time thoughts into any daytime reality. This was probably a fortunate outcome; their father - normally a friendly soul - had a temper, and could be extraordinarily ruthless at times (which George could claim to have experienced after stepping out of line on one or two of his farm duties).

A year or so after that three-month out of college idyll, he graduated from studying with young men who hailed from large country spreads, to working on one of those country estates in his own right. This came in the form of employment on a 1,000-acre farm, in the wealthy Western District of Victoria. *Jackeroo George* became his Aussie moniker, which sounded all fine and *Ned Kelly-ish*, but was in truth the lowest form of station hand that one could aspire to.

To compensate, the boss, a wonderfully soft-spoken, chain smoking, ex-alcoholic, and his wife (who cooked mouth-watering mutton chops) looked after George like their own son; though once again there were also a couple of dreamy daughters, plus a particularly alluring housemaid – a sultry 18-year-old of Dutch descent - to complicate matters. The dreamy daughters remained just that, totally out of reach (again probably wisely so); but the tempting housemaid and George did come to grips, just before she ran off to become a nun. He was never quite sure, whether their brief encounter had anything to do with her decision to shy away from the real world in favour of celibacy in the hallowed halls of the Roman Catholic church, thus lifelong abstention from any further involvement with the male of the species!

As a *jackeroo*, his main responsibility was to shepherd a flock of 5,000 sheep from paddock to paddock each day, sometimes on horseback, at other times by motorbike. Then, there was a tractor that at times he would be told to drive around and around 100-acre *paddocks*, pulling a cultivation machine of some sort or other. Thirdly, he was entrusted with the care of an early model *FJ Holden*, which he would sometimes take out for a spin on the local backroads. He didn't do too badly on the first responsibility,

but failed miserably on the other two, by flying off the road and crashing the old car with no brakes into a track-side ditch, then running the tractor out of oil (the machine suffering a seized engine while he was half asleep at the wheel)!

True to self, his boss treated both misdemeanors in characteristic, laid-back style. Running the car off the road, so it had to be pulled out of the ditch was one thing - the car was a bit of an old banger anyway – but letting the tractor engine grind to a halt whilst at the wheel, was totally another. The tractor was reasonably new and a very valuable asset to the farm operation; any significant down-time would be costly.

George really did think he was *up for the chop*, or at least a very serious bollocking. But faithful to form, Joe looked at the ground for a while, before taking a last long drag on the current *Camel* - as if searching for inspiration - then throwing the butt down and scratching it out in the dirt with his boot. Gradually his head came up, moving from looking at the fag-end down below, to eyeballing George, now noticeably trembling. It was a withering look, followed by his usual Aussie drawl:

“Well, you fucked up good and proper there George, didn’t you? We’ll have to try to get the bloody thing fixed, but for Christ’s sake don’t do it again.” There was a significant pause before he finished ... “Or I may be forced to have a word with your uncle!”

George breathed a huge sigh of relief. *“Thanks Joe. Thanks a million. Appreciate that.”* Then: *“Sorry Joe, I’ve run out of smokes. Could I ‘bott’ a Camel off you?”*

What a cheek: he had just cost the farmer a small fortune in spare parts, not to mention a long delay to work routines, and here was this lowly *jackeroo* asking for cigarettes from his boss!

Joe, being the man he was, agreed of course, shook three or four sticks into his hand, then passed them over and turned to walk away in silence, obviously aggrieved, but trying not to show it; already focused on some other pressing matter.

At the time, George thought very little of the reference to his *uncle*, but in hindsight it was quite a telling slip. Joe of course, was talking about John, the man who had become

something of a stepfather to George following his arrival in Australia. The two older men had been best mates since boyhood, after attending the same elite grammar school, in Ballarat, some twenty years before; the very same school that George had been sent to, soon after he set foot in Australia. If he had stopped to think why it was, that this *uncle* (as Joe had mistakenly called him) had become his benefactor, and such a solid one at that, George might have come up with answers to his own heritage, long before he did eventually find out the truth.

It was almost certain that John (labelled in theory as the elderly brother-in-law of George) had confided in Joe (his best friend for thirty years) about the young man's true identity. In other words, his boss had most likely been informed that the young arrival from England was Dorothy's illegitimate son, whom they had left behind as a toddler.

John had paid for our teenager to travel to Australia, then had underwritten his elite school fees, plus his time at the expensive agricultural college. In addition, Joe was a board member at that same college, which had probably helped to secure enrolment, while the long-term friendship between the two older men, had resulted in this first job for George, on the farm. This, when pieced together, could explain Joe's reluctance to come down too heavily on his young employee for the misdemeanor with the tractor, when he would probably have almost slaughtered anyone else in the same situation. George owed this *uncle* John a great deal in terms of his new start to life in the land down under, but he never stopped for a minute to ask: ... "Why?"

George recalls those early times in the land 'down under':

I look back now to my early days in Australia as a revelation! Wide-open spaces and cloud-brushed skies all came together to attack my senses, bringing a broader, more accommodating attitude to life as I knew it. Flat grasslands dotted with gum trees stretching out to blurred blueish hills in the distance. I always recall the drive to The Grampians, where the road as straight as a fork handle, disappeared into faraway mountains, which seemed to take forever to reel in. In the heat of summer, mirages appeared on the tarmac, up ahead of the car.

My first two or three years were to do with school and college; in itself illuminating: what went on between the hallowed walls of both was a paramount test for my immigrant mind. In England I had rebelled and sought alternatives to the mainstream, but in Australia - after realizing my sins and opting for the straight and narrow – those same dubious alternatives came to meet me, and far outdid anything I could have imagined from before. When I saw fellow students destroying the geography teacher by tormenting his sanity, I found it hard to believe; he was English to the core, and they dealt a final blow way below the belt, by ridiculing the fallen might of the British Empire. The empire thing meant little to me, but I felt sorry for the teacher, a gentle giant who had praised my work in front of the class. He went out on stress leave, never to return!

I spent less than six months at school, then declared - much to my new family's consternation – that even after performing admirably I was, like my namesake teacher George, never to re-visit that place. I had grown beyond those school years; was above the boyish pranks and hated the dreary grey school uniform (though it wouldn't have made any difference if it had been pillar-box red). As well, I resented being forced to front up for Aussie-Rules - or aerial ping-pong as it was sometimes disdainfully called – in the mud and rain! Who cares if it was a cross between football (the real version) and rugby: on some occasions two halves can struggle to produce a whole!

Somehow – and with considerable help from Joe, a good friend of my adopted family - I became the youngest recruit at a newly-formed private agricultural college (of which Joe coincidentally happened to be a board member). There, the Australian revelations continued, but on an exalted plane, with the exploits I had known before, paling into insignificance. My claim to fame, even as youngest in the year, was to excel in the field of dirty ditties, leading the late-night chorus in a final verse of 'Tell us another one, just like the other one', when everyone else had exhausted their booze-saturated memories. I also gained fame for brawling in the gravel with one of the lecturers, following an ill-advised beer guzzling contest at a college woolshed barn dance. It was a bad choice; he was built like a small tank and reputed to have played rugby for the 'All Blacks'. In contrast I was an immature and rather skinny import from 'Pommy-land'. I licked my

wounds the following day, but surfaced to applause and admiration from my mates. The incident brought college fame and quite a few new friends.

The visit by my compatriots, John, Paul, George and Ringo – at the height of their fame – triggered some unforgettable happenings, including the concert itself of course, at Centennial Hall in Melbourne, better described as an oversized tin shed with no acoustics whatsoever, where myself and four college mates had seats about ten rows from the stage. Even that close, it was hard to distinguish the chords of ‘She Loves You’ from the screaming all around. As males we were certainly in the minority.

We had managed to arrange those prize seats by queueing overnight for tickets, the five of us juggling our turn in the line with rides around the centre of town in my friend’s hot MG sports car, which boasted an eardrum-busting exhaust ... and apparently no brakes!

It was as if those errant ways from early teens had come back with a vengeance, the difference being that now it was all deemed pretty much legal and above board. I could not believe my good fortune, though kept it all very much to myself (as I guess my fellow ‘inmates’ did too). I hesitate to think what might have happened if parents had cottoned on to what was actually happening in the name of education within those premises: *laissez faire* is one thing; this was beyond the pale!

And yet, looking back, it worked. I entered the place a pale-faced ‘Pom’, with a slow West-of-England accent, but emerged a reformed, almost unrecognizable end-of-teens youth, with hair a shade lighter and skin a shade darker, accompanied by a remarkably perfected Aussie drawl. Unconventional methods perhaps – baptism by fire one could say - but at the end of it all, I had become a comparatively mature individual, ready to take on whatever Australia wished to throw my way. I was up for the challenge ahead.

As it happened, the first thing tossed in my direction was a year’s stint on (benefactor) Joe’s ranch, set in the elite farming lands of Victoria’s Western District. An iconic feature I noticed on first arrival, was the property’s white-painted weatherboard homestead: a single-story affair, surrounded by shady trees and lush pastures, with iron roof and wrap-around veranda, encompassing a labyrinth of rooms. In the height of summer, the

expansive green paddocks took on the hues of tinderbox browns and yellows. I wish now I'd had the inclination at such a young age, to sketch or paint that scene: an image of rural Australia I came to know and to love.

Farmer Joe was a unique individual, and we became good friends during my all-too-brief stay. To replace his addiction to booze, he had formed an uncontrollable affiliation with 'Camel': the strongest of cigarettes. This was the untipped variety, which he tended to smoke down to the limit, meaning his fingertips were coffee-coloured with nicotine stains. On one cold Spring morning, not long past dawn, I remember peering through the windscreen of his Peugeot 504 - the inside full of smoke, the outside shrouded in mist – trying with difficulty, to spot newborn lambs. The engine was running and the heater was at full blast, rendering our task to see through the glass, almost impossible.

"Look George, over there, next to the gum tree," Joe drawled, pointing at some blur in the distance, whilst holding an almost done 'Camel' and wiping the screen with an old rag. "You see it? There's a ewe with newborn twins," Then taking another drag: "Just nip out and see if they're all OK. Call me if you need any help." I zipped up my jacket, opened the passenger door and plunged into the morning frost.

The man had a wonderfully calm nature: a lesson in overcoming adversity as springboard to success. From a notorious past, where he led the local community a merry dance, and tormented his family with incoherent homecomings, he showed enormous fortitude to make a 180-degree turn, becoming a respected businessman, devoted father, qualified pilot, and by the time I met him, highly esteemed chairman of the local town council.

I joined Joe's team as 'Jackeroo', the lowest ranking of three permanent workers. Bob, the head guy, was a relatively short, blonde-haired ball of muscle and dinky-di Aussie; while Tony, the next in line, a lanky immigrant, recently arrived from southern Italy, was learning on the job, like me. Bob was tough but straight; happy to teach me all I wanted to learn. Tony on the other hand was something towards the opposite: competitive and eager to trip me up whenever the right moment arose. Like the incident when the tractor

engine seized, as I was dozing off whilst rotating around and around a 100-acre paddock. Tony had helped me service that tractor but made no mention that the oil filter could have been faulty. After the event I became convinced he had known.

But by and large the three of us got along pretty well, jointly reveling in humorous incidents, which often occurred. One day we were all three out and about in the farm 'ute', with the dogs, picking up stray sheep that were 'fly-blown' (meaning their rear end was covered in a stinking mess of dung and maggots). I had wondered why one of the dogs was called 'Horny', until I turned around to see him in action. We had just loaded a few rather messy ewes onto the tray behind, and 'Horny' had jumped on board as we took off. Now he was hard 'at it', with one of our woolly passengers.

"Donta worry abouta that" quipped Tony in his best Aussie-Italian. "Horny boy, he a like a pig in a shit!" Bob just smiled and drove on.

Another amusing episode – in retrospect that is - came about when I was not actually with my crew, but was fairly sure they had set it up. There I was as usual, half asleep at the tractor wheel, turning the soil of some or other paddock, when all of a sudden I awoke with a start to one almighty ear-shattering roar, which completely eclipsed the drone from the tractor.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" I yelled, almost falling off my seat. "What the hell was that?"

In that instant, I could not work out whether the tractor had blown up, or World War Three had begun. What had happened in reality, was that the pilot of a light aircraft, out for a training run – there was an airfield on the property – had cut the throttle on the plane, thus gliding down behind me, but out of my view; then when perhaps just 20 or 30 feet above my head, the pilot had applied full throttle, powering the plane up and away. The noise of course, was incredible! When we next met, the other two seemed to know all about it, so I suspected Bob – in flight-training mode at the time – was in the pilot's seat, and even Tony might well have been on board too ... just for the laugh!

When the time came, it was hard to leave the place. I had become smitten with a young lady of Dutch descent, who came to work as housemaid at the homestead. I was at the right age of course - pumping with hormones – and the arrival of this seeming angel from the North, with lilywhite skin and rosy cheeks, came like a gift from the blue heavens above. As it turned out, that wasn't far off the mark, because after a few weeks, when we appeared to be getting along famously, my angel up and left. I was told later in hushed tones, by Vera (Joe's wife), that she had answered the call, to join a convent and become a nun!

“Jesus fucking Christ!” I muttered, out of Vera's earshot – it had become a common phrase of mine at the time – “Just when I was getting started!”

From Joe's ranch, I moved to the city and my first 'real' job (as I viewed it then). It was a total contrast, where I became a lone lodger, with a small bedroom in a typically suburban, cream-brick house, owned by a sweet but widowed pensioner. I saw little of the elderly lady, apart from breakfast and occasional dinners; bussing off to the office early each morning, in training to become a representative for a national company: my introduction to the corporate world. She seemed not to object to my random booze-fuelled homecomings following the '6 o'clock swill', as early closing was then known.

In that training I was one of seven raw recruits: an interloper who hailed from a place viewed as an upstart in the world of agricultural education: a place simply designed to serve silver-spooned sons of the landed gentry. In contrast, the other six trainees arrived from a better known and recognized state-run college. Yet, as luck would have it, I was the one selected by Tom, the marketing manager, to leave the State of Victoria and work directly under his guidance, across the border in South Australia. In many ways, that move defined my twenties and thirties. From these raw beginnings, Tom and I became life-long friends, and towards the end of our association, he took me on board as junior partner in a new-start farm management firm, thus perhaps rubber-stamping his decision years before, to single me out for a separate role when we first met.

With three years under my belt in the 'lucky country', and now approaching the end of my teenage years, I had changed from a somewhat cantankerous English youngster into a rather well-formed Aussie male. But as part of the transformation, I had decamped to another Australian state, a long day's drive away from the family that had sponsored my travel from The British Isles, and given me a loving home. They supported me through school and college and helped me to buy my first car; always there in the background to come to my aid, if and when I needed assistance.

Looking back, it was perhaps an uncaring thing to do, but I was young and ambitious, and at that tender age there was not a smidgen of guilt. Would things have changed if I had known from my arrival in Melbourne, that the lady at the head of the family was in fact my biological mother? In all probability, Yes, I think it would have caused a major shift in my attitude, because once I did become aware of the truth, the indifference and lack of remorse shown at the time, did return to play on my mind.

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