

## **Cathedral Rock National Park**

### **New South Wales**

Cathedral Rock National Park, in northern New South Wales, is a place of grandeur and tranquillity. It was midmorning when we arrived at the Native Dog Area of the park. I was immediately struck by the stillness. The birds were silent, resting after their early morning choral exertions. There was no breeze; the leaves on the trees hung immobile; the grasses stood motionless. The sun was bright in a cloudless sky, but it made little impact on the crisp, sharp cold of the high granite country. Each indrawn breath felt like shards of ice.

There were no other cars in the car park; we were alone in this magnificent, rugged country. Large trees were scarce, but there was a harsh beauty in the twisted snow gums, the stringy-barks and narrow-leaved peppermint trees. The smaller silver wattle, fierce-looking banksias, the many blackened and fallen logs, the scattered spiky shrubs and grasses, and the tiny wild flowers, all combined to create an atmosphere both stark and beautiful.

Signs advised that grey kangaroos, swamp wallabies, brush-tailed possums and dingos inhabited this area, but there was no sign of movement among the trees. A still, watchful silence pervaded, which seemed to emanate from the huge granite tors that dominated the landscape. These dramatic formations were created by nature, with no assistance or interference by humans. Here was art without artifice: massive boulders smoothed by wind and rain into soft rounded shapes, their surfaces weathered and pocked, some fitting together so closely no light could be seen between them, others poised precariously one atop the other, a delicate balance defying the laws of gravity. Sharp slabs sheared off by some unseen hand lay where they fell, the newly visible surfaces revealing myriad shades of pink, grey and black. All around, tiny flakes of crystalline granite carpeted the ground. On the trees and fallen logs the colours of the lichens echoed those of the granite, flesh colours of pink, cream, brown and black.

Were there, I wondered, "wood-satyrs dwelling in the rugged rocks", or "giants puffing and snorting down from the hilltops". Perhaps not. The "marvels" I could see around me were of nature and the earth, rather than the ferocious creatures encountered by Sir Gawain in his wanderings in the medieval wilderness of Wyril.

As we walked, the hush was broken only by the crunch of the decomposed granite underfoot, cracking and crackling like hard-packed snow. There was a timelessness to the landscape. The air was thick with ancient memories: of the eons since the first eruption from the molten core of the earth; of the ages during which the magma slowly cooled and crystallised; of the millennia during which the rocks were shaped by the elements. The terrain reverberated with power: of the water which dripped and dissolved, and froze in the cracks; of the cold and the ice which expanded and fractured the rocks; of the heat of sun and fire which shaped and coloured the environment.

All around was evidence of bushfires, in the darkened tree trunks, the burnt out stumps and the fallen logs. The dominance of blacks and greys created an atmosphere that was gentle and peaceful. Black is my preferred colour in clothing - it calms and relaxes me - and the subtle palette in this place had a similar soothing effect on my body and my psyche.

So often my thoughts race round and round like a computer searching for a file, a hard drive badly in need of defragmentation. I have tried many techniques in an attempt to still my mind, but with little success. The quiet of meditation merely creates the perfect environment for worry; mantras are an ideal accompaniment to inner agitation; relaxation tapes block out background sounds and allow me to focus on the foreground noise of my thoughts. But here, in the midst of these ancient stones, I found a quietude untroubled by nameless anxieties. Like Australia's eucalypt forests, these rocks just "are". They sit in stillness and silence, solidly rooted in the earth, immobile and ageless, wise and serene.

In the rainforest that we had visited the previous day there had been a feeling of crowding, of lush, rich, burgeoning growth. It was warm, fecund and nourishing. The air was heavy with moisture, pressing on my body. Here, despite the looming rocks, there was room to breathe. It was spacious, expansive and unobtrusive. The air was light and dry, crisp and refreshing. I felt both relaxed and invigorated.

In the low-lying area below the tors the ground was soggy, supporting heath-land plants and grasses. A tiny stream meandered through the area, its edges fringed with ice. The wet granite sand in the stream bed revealed a depth and richness of colour at which the dry rocks above merely hinted.

Boardwalks led through the wetlands and across the stream. As I paused at a little bridge a movement on the left caught my eye. It was a dingo, frozen in the act of drinking; my presence must have disturbed it. The creamy brown of its pelt provided an almost perfect camouflage against the rocks. For a long moment neither of us moved, until the dingo turned and silently melted into the background of boulders and trees. What a gift! I had hardly dared to hope I might see one of the magnificent native dogs for whom this area was named. I have since learned that dingos mate for life so, in all probability, its partner was not far away. What better inhabitants for this ancient site than these primeval animals?

I found a flat rock beside the stream, sheltered from the wind, and sat with the sun warming my back. Having been reminded earlier of Gawain's adventures in the wilderness, I could not resist revisiting the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to see what had triggered my thoughts. Was it the similarity of the two landscapes, with their rugged rocks and trees "weird and wild", or was it something more? Did they share some common essence that I had recognised unconsciously? What I felt most strongly sitting there was the stillness, of a landscape that was timeless, enduring, patient. I almost wrote "waiting", but then I realised that waiting was the antithesis of the Native Dog Area; it was not waiting, it was fully present in the moment, self-contained and complete. The voices that whispered in the wind told of what is and what had been, not of what is yet to come. Perhaps this was the secret of its ability to bring quiet and peace to my mind. The very "nowness" of it precluded anxiety about what might, or might not, be in a future time.

I needed to look at *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* again. When we returned home I sat and read. I had only reached line 750 when I knew that this text induced in me the same calmness as had the granite landscape of Cathedral Rock National Park. The language that I could hear beneath the printed lines spoke of a reality that left no room for doubts, questions or nameless angst.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Gawain's journey through the wintry wilderness resounds with a mystery that is beyond words. In the 1950s John Speirs posited that, in reading some medieval works, one is tapping into memories and remnants of ancient myths and rituals extant in the textual unconscious. Texts like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provide an environment through which these age-old memories can break through into human consciousness. I have but to read with an attentive and receptive mind, attuned to the murmurings beneath the surface of the text.

In and through the evocative descriptions of ancient crags, twisted forests and dramatic vistas in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* - which are far from classically beautiful, but are possessed of an awesome rugged grandeur - something beyond the natural world can be sensed. I read more closely, and discovered dissimilarities between Gawain's experiences in the wilds and my own among the granite tors. Where Gawain rode "in peril and pain", I wandered in awe and admiration. Where he encountered "bulls and bears and boars" I met only one diffident dingo. Why, then, are these two places linked in my mind?

In attempting to address this paradox, I return to the evocative sense of stillness I experienced in both geographical place and textual place. Despite their seeming incompatibility, this is the dominant characteristic they share - a solitary "presence" that is timeless, enduring and formidable. It is evoked by their physical appearance: the atmospheric bleak beauty; the stillness of immovable boulders and frozen icicles; the immensity of huge tors and giant forests. They are both isolated landscapes, places of physical and emotional aloneness, with, according to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, "no one but God to talk with".

My reading practice is a solitary one. I sit. I read. I listen. I engage with the text slowly, with mounting excitement for, no matter how skilled one is at reading Middle English, rarely is the exact meaning of a work evident at first glance, so there is always an unknown character to the text. Reading a Middle English text for the first time is like watching a mystery slowly unfold, in words, in images and in events.

The vibrant language of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is, of itself, a thing of beauty and joy for the reader, engaging the senses, lifting the heart, nourishing the spirit. How clearly I hear the sound of the "cold clear water" as it falls from the clouds, or drops "clattering from the crest" to hang in frozen medieval "iisse-ikkles" above Gawain's head. I shiver in sympathy as I read of how "nearly slain by sleet, he slept in his irons". I delight in the image of the "rough ragged moss, ranged everywhere".

The use of alliteration in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as seen here, both magnifies its otherness and enhances its appeal. It also leaves open the possibility - dare I suggest it - that a word selected to fit the alliterative pattern may sometimes exhibit a slight dissonance of meaning. Why, else, in the midst of a description of Gawain's bitterly cold journey through frozen hills and valleys, where even the birds could be heard "piping piteously for pain of the cold", would we read of the hero "by a mountain in the morning riding *merrily*" (my emphasis)? Far from detracting from my love of the text, this small quirk enhances it, in the same way that a dead tree in an idyllic scene creates a point of contrast, and highlights the perfection of its surroundings.

Gawain's journey through the landscape of the frozen forest (be it merry or miserable) is a prelude to his encounter with the old woman, whose craggy, wizened face mirrors the rugged wintry terrain. Winter is at the end of the annual seasonal cycle,

and the beginning of the new round. The harvest is in, leaves fall away, seeds lie dormant gathering strength to greet the spring. The old woman is coming to the end of her life, perhaps preparing for entry to a new cycle of existence. This crone is later identified as "Morgan the Goddess", which is intriguing, but is not what I want to explore at this time.

What strikes me here is the inevitability of the cycles of growth, fullness and decline, seen also in the landscape of the Native Dog Area, which is gradually decaying and returning to flatness as the granite tors crumble and the trees fall and decompose, to await some future time when another eruption of the earth's core will life it up once again. I am struck by the paradox of experiencing "nowness" in the midst of constant change, of being fully present to what is, in the knowledge that all is mutable. In the earth, as in medieval literature, symbols shift, features are transformed and meanings altered, but her presence remains, constant.

Over many years of reading tales from long ago, and of listening to the language of nature, I have come to the realisation that I am nourished by these two discrete but intimately connected sources: words and places, each of which provides me with access to a mystery that is beyond the purely rational. In the dramatic granite landscape of the Native Dog Area and the evocative descriptions of the mountain wilderness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* these two sources came together with profound effect.

- Patricia Rose -