

Mt Warning Caldera

New South Wales

Ever since my visit to Fraser Island last summer I have wanted to follow the passage of the Fraser Island sands back to their place of origin. To this end, last weekend I headed south to northern New South Wales to see what more I could learn of the prehistoric geology and geography of eastern Australia.

I drove first to the lookout at the top of the Border Ranges for a view of the huge volcanic caldera centred on Mt Warning. I approached the lookout through a fine veil of mist. Silently I beseeched the wind and the clouds for a clear view this time (so many times I have stood at the lookout in thick, wet cloud, unable to see more than a few feet in front of me – in itself an awesome, unworldly experience, but also extremely disappointing). Like the old man in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* I (metaphorically) knocked my staff "on the ground, which is my mother's gate" and cried: "Dear mother, let me in!" As the mist parted (seemingly in response to my heartfelt petition) I faced a dramatic sight.

The Mt Warning caldera is over forty kilometres in diameter, and a thousand metres deep. The steep mountains which rim the valley to the north, west and south are heavily treed. On the eastern boundary the action of the Pacific Ocean over millennia has worn away the edge of the caldera, leaving only a few remnant rocky headlands.

Cloud masses touched the tops of the encircling ranges, and formed a downy cap on Mt Warning (or "Wollumbin", which is Aboriginal for "cloud catcher" or "rain gatherer"). The regular rainfall this generates spills down the slopes into a multitude of small and large streams. The most dramatic of these are the three arms of the mighty Tweed River which drain the caldera and continue to erode it, carrying the soil and sand out to sea, from where it is washed northwards to the outcrops and islands of Queensland.

Something blocked the sun, and I stood momentarily in shadow. I looked up to see an eagle riding the air currents, slowly circling the crest of the crater, perhaps a descendant of the two eagles which Zeus sent out in mythical times to find the centre of the world. The two birds circled the globe, finally meeting at Delphi, where Zeus set up an egg-shaped *omphalos* or navel stone; today a copy of this archaic *omphalos* stone has pride of place in the archaeological museum at Delphi.

When I was there two years ago I found myself slipping very easily into mythological mode, and was deeply moved by the thought that I stood at the centre of the world. That night I sat on the balcony of the hotel overlooking the deep valley at the base of Mount Parnassus and pondered the meaning of "the centre of the world" today, in my own life. Unwilling to cede this title forever to Delphi in modern-day Greece, I realised that the centre of my world is the land of my birth, the place of my heart, my homeland, Australia. And, more particularly, one very special part of eastern Australia.

As I gazed down from the Border Ranges lookout at the giant bowl shape laid out below me, it seemed that Mt Warning, standing firmly in the centre, was like a giant Australian *omphalos* stone. With its rich, dark, lushly forested slopes it required little imagination to see this dramatic caldera formation as a nest for this giant cosmic egg. Or perhaps the circular valley, with the waters gushing from the mouth of the Tweed River in the far distance, is a cauldron of birth: nourishing the pastures; providing irrigation to the farmlands; generating the sandy islands to the north; nurturing the inhabitants of the valley with the benevolence and beneficent generosity of a mother.

I explored the birthing metaphor further: I seemed, as so often in my journeying, to have arrived at a place where the four elements converged in ongoing celebration of their common creative purpose. The volcanic remnant recalled the originating fires which birthed the universe. The embracing air high in the mountains evoked images of the stardust that burst forth in that first moment of emergent energy, and of which all matter was made. In the distance I could see the ocean from which creatures emerged eons ago to walk on the land. Nearer to hand, the earth displayed her generative powers in an abundance of flora and fauna.

I descended into the caldera. From the floor of the valley, Mt Warning dominated my vision. Besides being a mythical *omphalos* stone, this mighty edifice is also the remnant magma chamber of the ancient volcano, made of a rock highly resistant to erosion by water and wind. I drove slowly around its base, watching how the profile of the mountain altered with my changing vantage points. The female figure reclining on the mountain top shrugged and stretched as if following my passage; perhaps after twenty or thirty million years of solitude she enjoys the stimulation of visitors. It was impossible not to be awed by the magnitude and the magnificence of this landform. It was inconceivable that anyone could be unaware of the power of nature in this place.

I slept that night in a camping ground beside the upper waters of the Tweed River (which was, at that point, only an unassuming stream). The next day I followed each of the branches of the river: the Tweed from the camping ground in the south of the valley; the Rous which hugs the foot of the escarpment to the north; the Oxley, which bisects the caldera. I stood on the bridge at the confluence of the Tweed and Oxley rivers, and further downstream I sat on the river bank at the popular tourist village of Tumbulgum (known to Aboriginal people as "The Meeting Place of Waters"), where the Rous joins its siblings. Finally, at sunset, I stood beside the now-mighty Tweed River as it flowed slowly and regally eastwards and then, in a sudden flurry of activity, rushed to spill itself into the ocean. Such beauty and such bounty!

For Aboriginal people this continues to be a site of tremendous cultural and spiritual significance. For the farming families who have, for generations, worked the land, husbanding their animals and tending their crops, this area is the source of their livelihood and of their self-identity. For many of the more recent arrivals, the Tweed River valley offers a gentle alternative to a frenetic city lifestyle.

Today, also, besides traditional Aboriginal spiritualities, there are a multitude of alternative spiritual traditions focussed on Mt Warning. In 1980 many of these came together for the huge Harmonic Convergence Festival which centred on Mt Warning, and some groups continue to meet for solstice and equinox celebrations, or to experience the mystery of the earth's ley lines.

I was here for yet another purpose: to see the birthplace of Fraser Island or, at least, of the sands from which it was formed. As I meandered through the valley, observing the ways in which the rivers had cut their way down the slopes and through the valley, I realized that this womb-like caldera was also a place of loss, of symbolic death, for the sands which originated here were gone, and only the crater remained, empty of sand. Birth and death: both were present here. Perhaps it was no coincidence that my visit began with thoughts of the old man knocking at the gate to the earth, beseeching his "mother" to let him in, and to reclaim his body in death. I stopped the car near a small picnic area. In the shade of an enormous Moreton Bay Fig tree, I continued my musings over a much-needed cup of coffee.

Birth and death are central to human concerns, and are perennial themes in literature. There is a prayer in a twelfth century manuscript (Harley MS 1585) which opens with an invocation to "Earth, holy goddess, mother of all", from whom all was brought to birth. These words - and the sentiments in the remainder of the poem - are so similar to those in the ninth Orphic Hymn from centuries earlier, which begins "Nature, all parent, ancient, and divine", that I am led to wonder at the connection between the two texts. Perhaps the ancient Greek text was a source for the medieval Latin text.

Only the Harley text, however, goes on to acknowledge the reality of death, noting humbly that "when the breath departs, we return to you" or (my preferred translation) "we take refuge in you". Simple statements - from earth we are born, to earth we return at death - but so eloquently expressed. I love the idea of taking refuge in the earth. Refuge, retreat, sanctuary, shelter, safe haven. Union with earth. To decay, to be part of the ongoing cycle of death and life.

We understand that age and illness bring us closer to death; at times it can even seem like a welcome reprieve from pain and suffering, a true refuge from our travails. It is less easy to accept the death of an infant as part of the natural cycle. A friend of mine gave birth to a stillborn baby girl last year. She was perfect. Ten tiny fingers, ten little toes. A halo of soft gold hair. A miniature rosebud mouth. Perfect, except that her diminutive lungs never drew breath; her dainty eyes never opened. A one-in-a-million accident meant that her umbilical cord was in precisely the wrong place as she was born, and it failed to deliver essential oxygen-rich blood throughout her delivery. This infant's connection to her mother - the centre of her world, her *omphalos* - had failed. From the body of her mother to the body of the earth in only nine months, this little girl's life cycle was so brief: conception, maternal body, gestation, birth, death, earth body.

Ideally, motherhood is a far more gradual process of separation: from the intimacy of infancy, through the measured letting go of childhood and adolescence, to the independence of adulthood. From the fullness of pregnancy ... to the empty nest of middle age.

As I sat with the dregs of my coffee, watching the antics of the russet-coloured cows and their funny, frolicsome calves in the neighboring field, I realized that my reminiscences had come full circle: from the fullness of the fertile mountains ... to the emptiness of the caldera; from the erosion of the sandy soils of the Tweed Valley ... to the emerging sand dunes of Fraser Island.

Premature death and volcanic eruptions disrupt these gradual patterns. They have a logic of their own, an ineffable logic which can be incomprehensible to humans, but I know that somehow, somehow, even if I cannot see it, at some cosmic level they must be a part of the pattern.

It was time to leave the valley. I had seen what I came for: the source of the sands from which Fraser Island was born. My little red car and I wound our way back up the escarpment, to emerge at last over the lip of the caldera. I glanced back at the valley below and the encircling mountains, so bright and clear today, and sent a silent "thank you" to Chaucer's old man with his staff for opening this vista for me, and to the earth herself for allowing me to see, both with my eyes and with my heart, the mysteries thus revealed.

- Patricia Rose -