

Water Holes

Mt Molloy, Qld.

It was late afternoon on a hot September day when we came upon the small township of Mount Molloy in far north Queensland. My mother and I had driven north from Mareeba, recalling memories of other times we had travelled this road together. We remembered Mount Molloy as a tiny, isolated spot on the dusty and desolate road to Laura and Cooktown, a place of no particular attraction except as a distance marker for tired travellers – the place where civilisation was farewelled with both anticipation and trepidation on the trip north, and greeted with weary welcome at the end of the long rugged trip south.

The Mount Molloy we encountered on that day both reinforced and confounded our memories. The road was paved now, no longer hard-packed dirt, pitted and dusty. The sparse, twisted gums, seemingly ageless, no longer wore their remembered fine powdery coating. The old buildings still stood, four square and stolid, shimmering in the heat haze – the pub, the old post office, the rusting engine, the tiny dwellings. The dry heat seared our faces, as it had done on countless occasions years before.

We drove through the town, a mere five hundred metres, a journey of less than sixty seconds, following the road until the bitumen petered out, and we were face-to-face with the long-remembered gravel surface of the highway north. As the car turned south towards Mount Molloy once again, we both felt the shadows of long-forgotten events encompass us. Memories long-suppressed erupted painfully. My mother remembered journeys through Mount Molloy marked by conflict, distress and despair. I recalled the pain, uncertainty and confusion of emerging womanhood, punctuated by unhappy car trips through this desiccated landscape.

Down the hill from the main thoroughfare we saw a road we did not remember or recognise. We followed it as it descended behind the row of houses, ending abruptly at a cluster of small water holes. We stepped out of the car in amazement; how could we not have known of the existence of this place? A sign announced that the site has been developed as part of the Australian Bicentennial celebrations in 1988, long after our last trip through Mt Molloy.

Tea trees edged the pools, staining them brown, papering the floor of the swamp with fallen bark and leaves, shading the water and the surrounding grassy banks. The reeds rustled gently; water fowl drifted quietly; lizards lazed on broken tree trunks. The waters were still and silent, dark and mysterious, yet curiously peaceful and welcoming.

A gentle, cooling breeze caressed our hot skins. We sat on the grass, inhaling the soft moist air which rose from the surface of the water. The movement of the lanky water striders formed ever-widening circles of ripples on the water's surface.

Slowly we relaxed, conscious only of the tranquillity that surrounded us, the welcoming spirit that seemed to embrace us. Little by little we became aware of the gentle sounds of the water lapping the bank by our feet. Gradually we felt the tension ebb from our bodies, as the painful recollections of the past seeped away, and the scars left by old memories faded. We sat, at harmony with each other, and with the gentle spirit of this place.

The water holes were a recent creation – a miracle of modern landscaping. This was not an ancient water site sacred to the Aboriginal people. Its very name identified it

as an outcome of the European entry to Australia, 200 years earlier. Like many white Australians, we had been ambivalent about the bicentenary, deeply proud of our Australian birth, yet conscious of the suffering of Aboriginal Australians brought about by the events of 1788.

In this newly-created place we were not intruding on the sacred heritage of Aboriginal peoples. And yet, despite its relative newness, its lack of an enduring spiritual tradition, we both sensed that this site, with its tannin-stained water and its papery melaleucas, was a place of mystery, a place where the sacred was palpably present. As the water and the trees, the reeds and the soft breeze worked their gentle magic, we knew it to be a sacred place, a place of healing, a women's site.

Softly, hesitantly, we shared what we each intuitively felt: that these pools were imbued with the sacred, alive with an ancient energy, suffused by a gracious strength. We spoke of a wise and gentle spirit who hovered over these pools. Of Her.

- Patricia Rose -