



THE LANSDOWNE VALLEY

A VISION OF BELL TREES

A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY ON THE SPLENDOURS OF A VERY SECLUDED REMNANT OF GONDWANA

MIKE RICHARDSON & GRENVILLE TURNER PHOTOGRAPHY



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PREFACE

This book is a photographic essay on the splendours of living at “Belltrees” - an isolated property of over 300 acres, nestled below the cliffs of The Great Escarpment, on the mid north coast of New South Wales. The rugged terrain has ultimately saved the splendid tall wet eucalypt forest and its hidden pockets of rainforest. Rainforest habitat contains just over half of all the plants and animals of Australia.

Coorabakh National Park adjoins “Belltrees” on its north and eastern boundaries.

The author has lived here since 1983 and has successfully rehabilitated extensive areas of rainforest by removing the introduced plants and exotic vines - especially lantana - and freeing trees and saplings of excessive vine tangles.

A network of 8 kilometres of bridal trails, formed from old logging tracks, allows easy access to those special areas of greatest biodiversity and scenic interest on the property.

The property itself is invisible from the road. There is no traffic. There is no flight path - only the sounds of the natural world. Days go by without the sound of

a petrol engine. No lighting pollutes the night sky.

This allows for a very quiet life without any unannounced visitors approaching the end of the lane. I can leave the house unattended and unlocked, keys in all the vehicles, for weeks at a time without concern. The well fenced paddocks support the horses in my absence.



THE GEOGRAPHY

THE LANSDOWNE ESCARPMENT

Agricultural land in the foreground gives way to forested steeper slopes that lie protected under the rim of the Great Escarpment. Above the rim lies Coorabakh National Park. “Belltrees” adjoins the park on its eastern and northern boundaries.

Near 100 ha of the forested lands on “Belltrees” are currently in the process of being covenanted to protect the superlative natural values of its rainforest habitat in perpetuity.

This photograph was taken from Mudfords Lane. Living at the very end of a 4 km dirt road provides protection for what “Belltrees” really is – a retreat.

Mudfords Lane is bordered by a handful of small properties of around 100 to 300 acres each. It is a very quiet, under developed road which gives it a remote quality despite being less than 30 minutes drive from Taree.



THE SUMMIT

The heavily vegetated slopes of “Belltrees” tower 450m above the surrounding farmlands of Upper and Central Lansdowne.

THE SUMMIT OF “BELLTREES”

MAPS



The first European to view the Lansdowne escarpment was likely Captain James Cook. Lying off the Manning estuary on 12 May 1770 he named the Three Brother Mountains at the entrance of the valley. He could see the campfires of First Nations peoples - the Biripi. They had held stewardship over a land rich in natural resources and had been able to sustain their culture over tens of thousands of years.



Taree is a small township on the north coast of New South Wales and at the centre of the Manning Valley. It is an easy four hour drive on double lanes to Sydney. It is well served at a daily level by train and plane.

The Manning supports a population of around 70,000 people, mostly residents of Taree and the coastal villages of Laurieton, Crowdy Bay, Harrington, Old Bar and Foster. The idyllic beaches of Crowdy Bay are only 20 minutes from “Belltrees”.

There are two small excellent primary schools in the Lansdowne Valley. They served my children well. The four high schools in Taree provide a lovely choice and serve the community well for the next step to tertiary level.

Work in the valley centres on agriculture, forestry, tourism and the service industries. The Manning Base and the Mayo hospitals are the biggest employers. I have worked there for the best part of my adult life. A truly caring community spirit exists that does not in the less personalised urban world.

THE GREAT ESCARPMENT

The Lansdowne Escarpment appears as a distinct cliff running from near Coopernook in the south east to the Comboyne plateau in the north west where it rises to 600 metres. This provides a corridor with a vegetated continuum allowing for the movement of plants and animals in the face of climate change. Hopefully, now more than ever, it will continue to do so.

The Great Escarpment has undoubtedly played a vital role in the survival of rainforest in eastern Australia through periods of climatic fluctuations. The Escarpment places an important role in the generation of rain and mist interception, producing localised high rainfall conducive to the growth of rainforest.

The Great Escarpment is a major geomorphic feature related to global tectonics. It is a single escarpment that runs east of the Great Divide almost the length of eastern Australia.

It originated by scarp retreat from a new continental edge created by continental rifting at the eastern edge of Australia about 80 million years ago. The Great Divide represents an up warp and watershed and is located tens or hundreds of kilometres west of the chasmic fault that marks the continental margin. The uplift and formation of the Great Divide was followed by the creation and subsequent retreat of the Great Escarpment by erosion.

The Australian continent moved north towards its current location but around 16 million years ago the Lansdowne valley drifted over a volcanic hot spot. This produced a massive shield volcano around Comboyne enriching the soils and allowing for complex rainforest development.

The numerous vertical rock faces on the property allow for a wealth of orchids, ferns, vines and rock figs. The caves beneath provide valuable habitat for microbats to roost and breed as well as being a haven for Sooty Owls.



LITHOPHYTE HEAVEN



ELKHORNS



DRY HEATHLAND

The edge of the escarpment with its shallow soils and bare rock allows for a very different vegetation type – dry heath and open woodland. A world of lithophytes, grass trees and heath flowers.



THE LANSDOWNE RIVER

Cross Creek, with its headwaters in “Belltrees”, feeds into the Lansdowne River. I cross this bridge on Warrens Lane on my way to work. The river sides are

lined with a cathedral rainforest of Weeping Myrtle. On three occasions in as many decades I’ve seen platypus at the crossing.

THE HOMESTEAD



A rainforest garden surrounds the extensive verandahs and operates as an air conditioning service. The entire garden was rehabilitated from what was cow pasture.

Please consult the website - www.belltreesthefarm.com



THE LIVING ROOM



THE KITCHEN



THE ENTRANCE



THE BEDROOMS



THE LIVING ROOM



THE BATHROOMS



THE MAIN SHED



CABIN ADJOINING THE MAIN SHED

THE PADDOCKS



Through a stand of Flooded Gums the author rides a favourite horse. Only 50 out of the 300 acres are used for agricultural purposes. It has been a warmblood horse stud since 1983.



BLAZE AND FOAL



WORKING IN THE ROUND YARDS



THE MAIN DAM

The largest of 6 artificial dams built on “Belltrees”, the main dam hosts a boatshed, jetty and pontoon. It is fed by a permanent spring and is 13 meters deep. Despite financial incentives, no grandchild has successfully dived from the pontoon and returned with a handful of mud from the bottom.

THE JETTY AND PONTOON



PEREGRINE LOOKOUT

This lookout affords views, not only of the Peregrine's eyrie, but the whole expanse of the property.



THE FIGTREE HIDE

This hide provides wonderful photographic opportunities when the Morton Bay fig is in mast. It operates like a supermarket – it's where all the fruit eating birds go and, at night, the flying foxes.



FIRE PROOFING

Bushfires are an inevitability in the Australian eucalypt landscape. As shown, a hot fire swept through the Lansdowne-Comboyne escarpment in 2009. Belltrees was well prepared.

Quoll Cottage and the Homestead are gutter guarded. The surrounding gardens are composed of fire-resistant rainforest species. Easily maintained fuel free zones-borders, tracks, trails and roads-encircle the house and the outlying sheds. Major firebreaks descend nearby ridges to arrest fires and allow for rapid back burning lines and firetruck access.

The house dam, the shed dam and the inexhaustible main dam all have firefighting pumps in situ. There is a separate fire pump with a water tank on a dedicated trailer and also another pump at Quoll cottage.

Water from the main dam can be pumped to the concrete tank above the house to be used whenever needed for the gardens or to top up the home dam during drought. Belltrees remains well prepared.



BACK BURNING OPERATION



THE COVENANTED LANDS

The subtropical rainforests at “Belltrees” are of outstanding universal value such that their conservation is important for future generations. They contain important and significant habitats for the conservation of biological diversity. “Belltrees” is also an outstanding example that represents significant ongoing geological processes and biological evolution. Major stages of the Earth’s evolutionary history are evident in the ferns, cycads and its primitive flowering plants e.g. *Bolwara* as well as its prominent geological features e.g. volcanism and the retreat of the Escarpment.

In recognition of these irreplaceable natural values “Belltrees” is currently being covenanted under a Biodiversity Conservation Agreement. This provides the land owner with on going technical support and financial assistance in relation to its maintainance and protection.

As appendicies to this book please also refer to the ‘Conservation Agreement’ and this ‘Conservation Area Values Report for “Belltrees” which are available at the website www.belltreesthefarm.com



MICKEY DRIPPEN'S CAMP

Mickey Drippen’s Camp is on the high road at the base of the escarpment. It is tucked in under a canopy of warm temperate rainforest and massive old growth eucalypts. It is a biological hotspot.

The Brush-tailed Phascogale, the Sooty Owl, the Square-tailed Kite and the Southern Angle-headed Dragon are regular visitors.



QUOLL COTTAGE

Like an original settler's cottage it is built with hardwood slabs cut over 100 years ago. Nestled in the very heart of "Belltrees" tall forests it is a real rainforest retreat.



QUOLL COTTAGE



QUOLL COTTAGE

RAINFOREST REGENERATION

Looking out from Quoll cottage it was evident in 1993 that exuberant and exotic vines festooned the rainforest canopy. The landscape has been heavily disturbed by prior logging practices such as the extraction of Red Cedar.

By simply removing alien invading plants, in particular lantana, by hand and by cutting back the exuberant water vines the rainforest canopy was able to recover. Bangalow palms, cedars and booyongs emerged.

1993



2003



THE NATURAL HISTORY



CROSS CREEK

THE GONDWANA CONNECTION

The rainforests of Central Eastern Australia represent a natural heritage of outstanding universal value to science and conservation as ancient and isolated reservoirs of great diversity of plant and animal life.

They constitute links in a chain of scattered rainforest islands between Barrington Tops and SE Queensland. They now have international recognition as important areas of exceptional natural beauty.

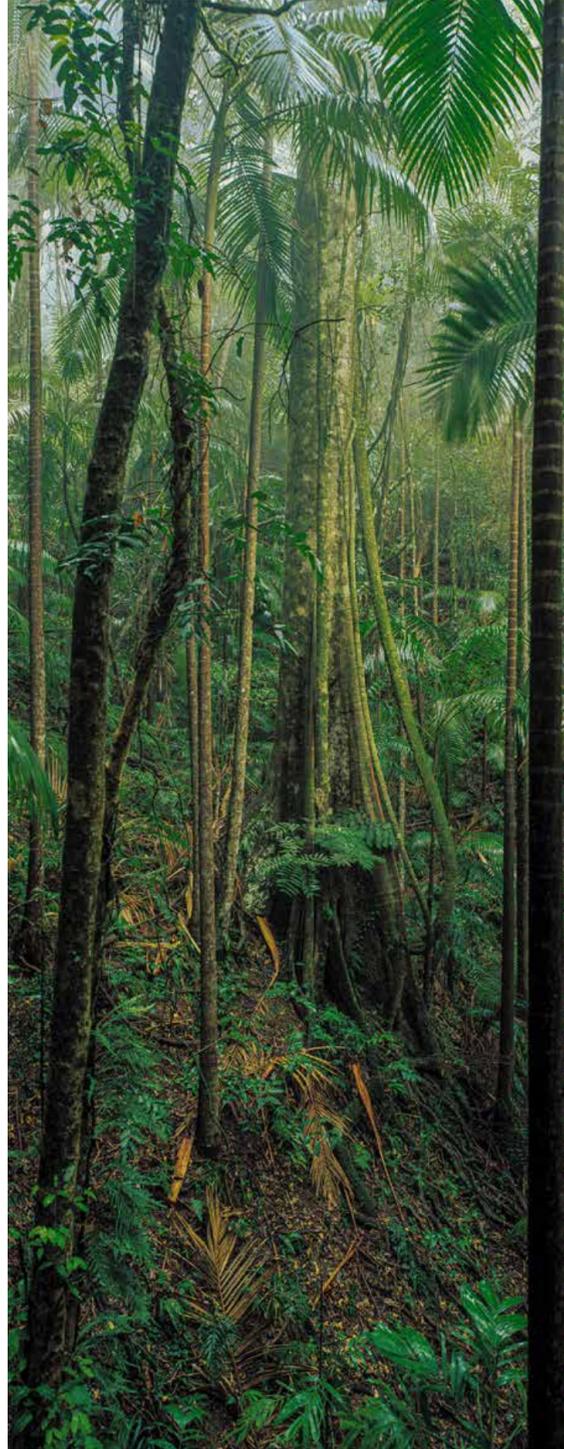
135 millions years ago the future continents of the Southern Hemisphere were all joined together as a super continent Gondwanaland. Tensions below the earth's crust split the giant landmass so that the continental plate of Australia was ultimately free to drift through varying latitudes encountering different climatic changes secondary to global ocean and wind circulations.

Gondwana land was a world of conifers, cycads, ferns and mosses until the flowering plants appeared some 135 million years ago. These flowering plants mixed with this world to form rainforest adapted to the cool wet climate of the time.

60 million years ago moist rainforests, similar to the rainforests of today, covered much of the Australian continent. Its dense canopy produced a closed forest. The majority of plant species that we see now in Australian rainforests descended from these closed forests.

45 million years ago Australia and Antarctica separated and Australia drifted northwards becoming progressively drier. This saw the evolution of hard leaf plants such as the eucalypts and wattles.

Our subtropical rainforests are unique in the Southern Hemisphere and indeed the world. They provide the core areas of refugia to which rainforest was increasingly restricted during drier times. Such refugial areas have probably been vegetated continuously by some form of rainforest for at least the last 8 million years. This continuity of habitat for both plants and animals means that in every sense, these rainforests can be regarded as illuminating the major stages of earth's evolutionary history. The occurrence of primitive species is of considerable scientific interest and provides evidence of historical continuity of rainforest from its ancient Gondwanan origins.



THE HIDDEN VALLEY

Sub-tropical rainforest is the most complex of vegetation types on the property. Such a forest features prominent buttressing, giant vines, palms and ferns.

SUBTROPICAL
RAINFOREST



Here, in the Hidden Valley the upper story is dominated by Giant Booyong and Yellow Carabbean trees, a middle story of Bangalow Palms and a simple under-story of Prickly Tree Ferns and Walking Stick Palms.

SUBTROPICAL
RAINFOREST

FUNGI

THE FOREST'S MAJOR RECYCLERS



REPTILES



LACE MONITOR



EASTERN WATER DRAGON



DIAMOND PYTHON



SOUTHERN ANGLE-HEADED DRAGON

BIRDS

FROM THE KITCHEN WINDOW



GOLDEN WHISTLER



BROWN THORNBILL



WHITE THROATED TREECREEPER



LEADEN FLYCATCHER



SPOTTED PARDALOTE



RED BROWED FINCHES

Over 132 different birds are recorded on the property.



KING PARROT



EASTERN SPINEBILL



SUPERB LYREBIRD

We know the origin of all the world's song birds are the rainforests of Australia. The Superb Lyrebird is a living fossil. During autumn and winter their penetrating calls ring out in the forests of "Belltrees". Their song has been praised as possibly the most elaborate, complex and beautiful in the world. A single lyrebird, like this female, can, in a year, shift 200 tonnes of soil and litter.

BIRDS

BOWER BIRDS



SATIN BOWERBIRD

Satin bowerbirds take up to seven years to achieve adult plumage. They paint their bowers with a perfumed plant-saliva mixture. They show remarkable song mimicry and a capacity for quite a startling choreography in their dance routines. The female



bowerbird rewards this senior intellect and aesthetic appreciation by accepting the advances of the most skilled males. Only the female builds the nest and rears the young. The male is a serial polygamist.

Sonny Jim attended this bower continuously for 23 years. It was within a few metres to the front steps of the farmhouse.



REGENT BOWERBIRD

MAMMALS



CHOCOLATE
WATTLED BATS



MOUNTAIN BRUSHTAIL
POSSUM



EASTERN GREY
KANGAROO



LONGNOSED
BANDICOOT



COMMON BRUSHTAIL
POSSUM

MAMMALS

THE EASTERN SPOTTED-TAILED QUOLL

Quolls are the largest marsupial carnivore of the Australian mainland. Being nocturnal and arboreal they are unseen and unknown to the majority of Australians. They are relatively common along the escarpment edge, preying on insects, small birds and reptiles.



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Please note the transparent, unreferenced plagiarism from the following excellent tomes. All mistakes are mine alone.

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Appendix 1 Conservation Area Values report for “Belltress”
404 Mudfords Lane, Lansdowne:
BCT Senior Ecologist, Joel Stibbard – 2019

Appendix 2 Conservation Agreement
Made under the Biodiversity Conservation Act, 2016 (NSW)
Conservation Agreement Number CA0034 – “Belltrees”



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grenville Turner has been my close friend since 1978. We did a movie together. He has been a great asset, with his labour, his humour and his imaginative perception of the natural world. It was only with Gren's help that I was able to pursue my ecological vision of "Belltrees". His intimate and superlative photographs of the region reveal the splendour of this forested world of ridges, cliffs, trails, caves and hidden valleys.

WWW.BELLTREESTHEFARM.COM

