No Further North

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James Cook's Endeavour, the ship that took him on his first voyage of discovery between 1768 and 1771, has unexpectedly turned up on the sea floor of Newport harbour, Rhode Island. There the Whitby collier ended its days in 1778, having been renamed, having served as a prison ship for the British, and having being sunk to protect the harbour from American attack. (These were the days of the War of Independence.) A legal tussle is now anticipated between the good folk of Newport, for whom possession is nine points of the law, and the British Government, which nominally still owns the wreck.

Either Newport or Whitby will be her final resting place, it seems. But there is another candidate, with no legal claim to match the American or British ones, but a moral claim perhaps greater than either; a town at the extreme north of white settlement of the east coast of Australia, whose connection to the Endeavour is so deep that were it not for Cook's ship it would probably not exist at all and certainly not bear the name it does; where, arguably, white settlement on the continent first took place; and where Cook came nearest to complete disaster but also found miraculous relief: Cooktown, in tropical north Queensland, whose local timbers plugged the holes made in the Endeavour's side when she foundered on the Barrier Reef. Those timbers, it turns out, will provide the very clue marine archaeologists need to prove that the wreck found in Newport harbour is in fact Cook's ship; no other English ship of the 1770s was patched with Australian wood. This is an account of a modern journey to Cooktown, lengthy and arduous in its way and by modern standards, but no less rewarding for that.

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Our odyssey started conventionally enough, at the bus terminus on Trinity Wharf, Cairns—a terminus the fixtures and fittings of which had absorbed the amount of lonely boredom and frustration bus halts invariably do absorb. Thankfully there was no frustration on this occasion, nor even any need to use the seats: it was 6.45 am, and far too early for things to be running late. Our hand-written tickets in our hands, my companion and I surrendered the

white copy (going up) to Mick the driver, and retained the pink copy (going down). Our bags were stored in the luggage trailer, a dozen or so others climbed on board, and at length we nosed into the quiet streets and the morning sunlight, passed the Casino and the glittering hotels, and began our passage to the north. There are two roads from Cairns to Cooktown, I should say before we go any further. The inland route is comparatively smooth, metalled all the way bar seventy kilometres of unsealed road, and often as featureless, dry, and dusty as an Australian road can be; the coastal route through rainforest and across numerous rivers—well, that is different.

Our departure was on time, but it took a while to really leave. More passengers needed to be picked up on the sides of streets or in the foyer areas of resorts, and some of them themselves disembarked at local tourist attractions. Outside the Cairns conurbation we pulled into one or two bijou retreats, invariably called Something-or-other 'Lodge', the existence of which was discreetly advertised on expensive roadside signs. Three Americans (two gregarious middle-aged women and one gloomy, saturnine, and speechless male) joined at one such Lodge and were later deposited outside Port Douglas, where there was some slight discussion about the fare. Once we passed the known environs of Port Douglas, however, genuine excitement set in: we were now truly away from the great domesticated tourist hub, and returning to something recognizably Australian, instead of merely International. By this stage, too, you realize that all the passengers actually are Australian - or residents, at least, if not nationals.

The excitement builds as Mick announces we must change bus in the little sugar town of Mossman. Out comes all the luggage, and after half an hour's wait on the baking street, around the corner comes an infinitely less suburban and more imposing vehicle than the shrunken coach we'd occupied heretofore. The bus was imposing in scale and build, certainly, rearing over the pavement like a griffin; but don't be under the illusion that it was in any sense smart. The new driver, too, was of a more pioneering spirit and appearance. Tanned, sunglass-less, rangy, and weather-worn compared to our first driver, Steve wore a battered felt Akubra hat with a reduced crown, and stubble rather than the carefully groomed Tudor goatee Mick had. In this respect vehicle and driver were perfectly matched. And it wasn't simply our luggage that went on board this time, but half a dozen piles of newspapers, some rolls of newsprint, two large boxes of Cheeto-Balls—an Australian popular snack like crisps—and half a dozen other smaller parcels addressed by hand (including a broad round grey plastic drain cover of some kind, up from a factory in Innisfail and destined for the

Bloomfield River). An atmosphere of Cobb & Co's colonial days surrounded the loading of all these things: also the sense that the bus was caught up in a web of expectation including other people than the fifteen to twenty people who climbed aboard that morning.

Of those people some were white middle class like my companion and I (a pair of English university lecturers having a look around); some were Aboriginal people; some were young backpackers. Some were clearly not well-off, if their luggage, their clothes, and the things they carried with them were any indication. There was a rather put-upon mum with a winsome little boy. There was one very small child, dressed only in a nappy and a teeshirt, travelling with his dad—who looked like a character from Dostoevsky, wearing all black, his head crew cut, his face freckled, his chin carrying a long, long ginger beard, and his legs appearing to be thicker at his ankles than they were as they approached his behind. The infant and the father had no luggage whatsoever, and much later that day they would simply disembark at a track along the road and walk off along it into the forest, heaven knows where to. Also there was an alternative culture person, a man of the woods. I say this because on one of our later stops, for a smoke near Cape Tribulation (one of Cook's names, and one of his tribulations of 1770 as he made his painful way up Australia's east coast, trapped between the shore and the Reef), this man removed his shirt, sat on the ground between some trees, and promptly disappeared. You could have walked within six feet without seeing him. He, too, had a long beard, only of wispy grey. His dilly-bag (his only luggage) was decorated with feathers and turtle shells. Not everybody in the bus was Australian; it turned out he was an American—and he certainly bore a passing resemblance to Kris Kristofferson.

Eventually we were all aboard, luggage and all, and the bus growled out of Mossman. It was a much more impressive vehicle, as I say: much noisier, much higher up, and yet in far more intimate contact with the ground than Mick's softly-sprung Toyota. Even before we left Mossman we'd been jounced once or twice, as if by way of a prelude of what was to come. It was a four-wheel drive Isuzu, seating about thirty I would guess. I was sitting in the front: riding postillion, indeed. When we were parked that had been a cooler-looking seat; once we started moving I got the full sun through the immense flat pane. Exactly one quarter of a spider's web was trapped forever in the top-right corner of my half of the windscreen, the shattered glass taped over with see-through packing tape. The vehicle registration sticker curled up with fatigue on the quarter-light to my left, and at my feet two handfuls of automotive electronics bulged out towards the floor. Seen through the window the snorkel of

the engine's air intake seemed to broadcast a warning or a challenge to the road ahead, like a loudspeaker.

The bus was called a Centurion: and well might we say 'go and he goeth'. It was the first vehicle I'd ever seen with six gears, and at first Steve had difficulty finding them, as if he was getting used to a rented car. Yet the engine was beneath our feet, beneath our backsides, pulsing, gasping, and roaring at us from underneath. Every once in a while an earsplitting Banshee-like scream would come from somewhere down there, for no reason I could establish. Everything clattered and rattled prodigiously; Steve's manifest shot off the engine cover between us; the novel I'd put down the moment the engine was started juddered about the dashboard; my camera hopped precariously in my lap; the smaller parcels fell between seats or gravitated towards the well of the mechanical door. Only the Cheeto-Balls stayed put.

Even between Mossman and the Daintree River the going is gentle enough: the final dive into utter wilderness is postponed against your expectations, and half an hour after leaving Mossman you pull up at the Daintree punt having passed the same paddies of sugar cane and the same cloud-capped green hills you pass in Cairns itself. And though after the punt you dive into the woods, and though the hills then lose the suave profile of their Cairns siblings and get a rougher, more vertiginous, and admonitory air (as if the same artist had drawn them, but in different mood), still the road is smooth and the progress quick. The Centurion roared happily away, raising veils of dust behind and swallowing veils of dust in front. The road is narrow, and the leaves nearest the track are lost in dust. The noise is overwhelming, and the only relief from the hurtling passage through the green and the dust are the occasional glimpses the rainforest allows you of the sky above or the sea to the right: sometimes we were high above it looking down into theatrical gulfs and capes; at other times it was quietly lapping on beaches of bone-coloured sand only twenty yards outside the window. In any case, it was as perfect as any image of the sea could be: 'one unclouded blaze of living light', as Lord Byron said of seas elsewhere.

Thus far the road was relatively familiar, though unsealed. I had driven it myself, in the family car. It was at Cape Tribulation that the Centurion's tribulations began: and we shared them with him. We saw less of the sky, for a start, and hardly anything of the sea. But who was looking, anyway? I would defy any passenger, riding postillion as I was, to remove his gaze from the moving spot twenty-five yards in front of the bus. The surface was unspeakable: there were potholes, great rifts where the wet season rain (most prolonged and

severe this year) had washed the road away, great mouthfuls of it pulled away by swollen creeks, of benign appearance now. (Above our point of entry they ran as clear as gin; below it they ran like cocoa.) Worse still were the dry creeks: three or four times we crossed great fields of medium-size rocks, pitching as if the Centurion were a dinghy on the open sea, only without any rhythm. Slimy smears still existed along the top of awesome ruts, as deep and dangerous as streetcar tracks must appear to a child on a bicycle. At the most nightmarish moments—when a particularly hideous pothole yawned up in front of us like an ogre's mouth—my face distorted by nervous hilarity, I looked back at my companion, his hands clamped to his seat as mine were, his eyes forming widening 'O's as we went bucking through the mottled darkness, every bit like a haunted charabanc in an American romance, pursued by a headless witch.

How long this went on for I can't say. Up hill and down dale we staggered, sped, burst, and crept. I only know it reached an appalling climax, paradoxically enough, when I saw some sealed road ahead. I was about to say a comforting word to the driver when the Centurion came to a grinding halt and he himself spoke. 'Here we go', Steve announced, in tones of unsuppressed stoicism: 'the climb.' He then compressed and decompressed two strange, small, and previously un-used levers at his side, and the Centurion, pawing the ground like an enraged bull, went into gear. I don't know which gear it was; but it was much lower than first. Then the Centurion threw itself at the incline and inched upwards at about the speed of a stair-lift or an elderly person's shopping trolley. Several minutes later and halfway up we pulled over; here Steve compressed and decompressed the two mysterious levers once more, but as he took his foot off the clutch the Centurion simply rolled back a yard. Three times he tried and three times the bus went back, until at last the gods smiled on us and we went up once more, only in due course to go down the very hill we'd climbed, if anything at even slower pace.

Was this after the Bloomfield river, or before? What did time and space matter, contracted as they were to what was immediately under the Centurion's wheels? The passage over the Bloomfield causeway was an idyllic moment of calm, dignity, and flat straight road, accompanied by a gentle splashing around our wheel-arches before we lurched back into the jungle as before. Sometimes we stopped, to drop off a parcel; the Cheeto-Balls were delivered, though perversely one Cheeto-Ball stayed behind and rolled up and down the steering well thereafter; the put-upon mum and her little boy got off at a bush-school; my

man from Dostoevsky and his infant child disembarked, as did Kris Kristofferson, shadow-like into the woods. Steve made a business-like attempt to deliver a packet at a (to strangers' eyes) bleak and shambolic Aboriginal settlement, where the only sustainable car was the policeman's and the only sustainable building was the chapel—though the children and young people who walked between the tatterdemalion collection of houses looked indefatigably strong. At length and at last we lurched off into a clearing in the woods: a campsite boasting only one tent, outside which a single male camper lay, incongruously reading a novel on the grass. Here three relaxed thirty-somethings produced chicken salad sandwiches and 4X beer for us, though there was no rest for the weary in other respects: the moment we arrived Queen's Greatest Hits started blaring through the grove, and one of the youngsters started the grass-cutter.

Unbelievably, the Centurion would go no further. His sense of outrage had already been made clear time and time again during our stops for drinks and smokes: he stubbornly refused to tick over while in arrest, which meant that Steve had to turn off and on a battery of switches before the old general would deign to start again. (I never heard Steve curse the Centurion, even so.) By this time, it transpired, there were too few of us to be worth his soldiering on. We were down to my companion and I, two backpackers, an aboriginal dad and his teenage daughter, and one or two others. Too few for the Centurion; one too many, perhaps, for comfort in a Landcruiser: yet into a Landcruiser we squeezed, driven by the third driver of the day, just called Smithy - who bore an uncanny resemblance to Roy Orbison, right down to the impenetrable, goggle-like dark glasses he wore. Our diminished pile of luggage was strapped onto the roof under our anxious gaze; I jammed myself between my companion and Smithy himself in the front seat; and before I had time to shake Steve's hand we re-entered the inferno.

The last leg to Cooktown I won't describe. It was 7 am when we left Trinity Wharf; nearly four in the afternoon when my companion and I triumphantly arrived at the veritable end of the road. We two were the last ones on; idiotically we were still squashed into the front seat, as if to request a change in arrangements would have constituted an admission of discomfort or distaste. By the end I felt like one of the chairbound, housebound, crippled old ladies in Dickens' novels. We had travelled agonizingly slowly through agonizingly beautiful valleys, where Brahmin cattle lifted their heads from fields of Kerry green; we had stopped to look at Black Mountain, which looks like an immense slag heap, only the slag in question is made up

of boulders the size of billiard tables, all painted a uniform black by some mysterious algae (the great rocks are haunted by - wait for it - the Rock-Haunting Frog); we had dropped off the others at the rim of the settlement, and then quite suddenly the road dipped alongside the Endeavour River, we passed the town's three pubs (Upper, Middle, and Lower: the Middle pub had been christened 'The West Coast' by some Cooktown wit) and came to rest at the Seaview Motel—which, properly speaking, is the Riverview motel, but we were too exhausted even to make the comment.

All I can say about Cooktown is you must go; if you haven't been you haven't lived—and I don't mean this in any ironical sense. It looks like a perilously small country town, and so it is: it has a population of only 1400 or so. But like some Australian country towns, and unlike others, it has an atmosphere of almost utter serenity, intensified for us of course by the clamour of the drive and the sense that there is, in white man's terms at any rate, no further north than this. It's true the famous Cooktown south-easterly trade wind wasn't blowing that day, and that the weather was perfect in every other respect, too. ('Beautiful day', I overheard a guest at the motel say to the owner. 'You could call the Queen your aunt', he suavely replied.) It's also true that we arrived on the weekend, whereas it seems Thursday and Friday nights can be a little rowdy to say the least. True that we were there before the season really kicks off with the Cook landing re-enactment on the Queen's Birthday holiday weekend. (What a debauch that must be, for a patriotic pom!) But I'm sure none of that matters. Our motel was spotless and tranquil, and run by one of nature's gentlemen—who don't often run motels, be it said. (This was a short trip full of uncanny resemblances, and our host was the spitting image of Kingsley Amis.) The people we met, not that there were many, were unfailingly polite, without being the least bit ingratiating. The other locals all had business to be getting on with, and time in which to do it. ('Sixty Minutes lasts an hour and a half up here', one waitress meaningfully informed us.) Our evening meal at the Sovereign was delicious; our breakfast at the Cook's Landing kiosk equally so. The Cooktown Hotel's wooden front bar on a hot noon was a paradise for the thirsty tourist, with the breeze gusting through the shutters and the pool table standing in silent expectation, with the bar's four beer taps and its four optics (gin, whisky, South Australian brandy, and Queensland rum), and with its grandly naive paintings of nineteenth-century diggings and the Cook landing (naturally). The James Cook museum had the immemorially fusty and woebegone atmosphere that every local history museum should have. The Cook memorials by the river were in keeping: particularly the cod-eighteenth-century one, all the way from Brisbane, with

its four little fountains around the base set in the eroded sandstone faces of four Australian mammals. (Cook and his crew were the first Europeans to encounter the kangaroo: not at Botany Bay, but at Cooktown.) The cemetery, with its Jewish and Chinese residents catered for 300 yards beyond the pale, remained a place of peace and meditation: many of the graves had patterns of cowries delicately pushed into the cement, or infant giant clamshells at their four corners, like cupped hands, empty now. The famous Mrs Watson, who died in a lurid tragedy on Lizard Island having unwittingly outraged local aborigines, has helped push up a double bougainvillea so shockingly pink as it nods over the grave of her and her infant son you'd almost believe in life after death.

But it is Mother Nature who steals the scene - as she usually does. We had crossed some rivers on our odyssey, and they are no spring chickens: but the Endeavour River beats the band. A good half mile wide as it passes the town, it curves right in front of it as if it were putting on a theatrical performance, from nearly due west sharply around towards the north, so depositing the shallows where Cook careened his battered boat, and forming a deep and stately body of water. Sand dunes line its opposite shore, and beyond them the dividing range stalks away, in buttes, plateaux, table mountains, and volcanic shapes of every description, as if to say that nothing could or should or would live beyond them. Cook and Banks battled up Grassy Hill, behind the town, on foot; and so did we. They looked for a way out of the reefs, and seeing none called the view a melancholy one, as well they might. ('This afternoon', Cook wrote in his journal on 19 June 1770, 'I went upon one of the highest hills over the harbour from which I had a perfect view of the inlet or river and adjacent country which afforded a very indifferent prospect'.) For us now nothing could be less indifferent. The view is grandiose, amphitheatrical, awe-inspiring: not least because it is the exact same view those two men saw, two hundred and thirty years ago. The range stands immoveably, the river slinks towards it sinuously, the Coral Sea is like a vast sheet of pewter, onto which to the north headland after headland throw themselves without finality. At times on board the bus we wondered who had the harder journey of it, the great navigator or ourselves, and truth to tell it was a hell of a trip: but I wouldn't have missed it for the world—and the last word must go to Mick, Steve, and Smithy, who got us there.