

Richard Lansdown

A NARROW ROAD IN THE DEEP NORTH

Many travellers by road or air between Townsville and Cairns will recall Hinchinbrook Island, lying close inshore between Ingham and Cardwell in northern Queensland. The dividing range at this part of the coast is imposing enough, but Hinchinbrook is a prodigious sight. The mainland escarpment is at least consistent in its deployment of volume and altitude, and the other islands visible from the highway present the volcanic flattened cone in conventional style, but the set of peaks across the channel looks like the Land that Time Forgot. Every analogy that springs to mind — wax spilt on restaurant tables, dribble castles, stylised vertiginous breasts, tumuli, barrows, clay shaped by impatient children, the vertebrae of random species of dinosaurs arbitrarily yoked together, Easter Island monoliths — either fails or bleeds into others. Is Mount Bowen the fifth or sixth highest peak in Queensland? Who cares? The state's highest mountain just nearby, Bartle Frere, is a wonderful sight, but does it rush up in front of your face like quadrillions of tons of rock on the end of a rod?

So Hinchinbrook demands to be explored, and unless you are going to pussyfoot about in daytripping fashion, the only way to do it is Shanks's Pony and the 30-kilometre Thorsborne trail along the island's eastern side, with this colossal collection of stones as your ever-present companion. A ferry took our group from the bleak and fatuous marina outside Cardwell and delivered us and our backpacks to the top of a set of wooden steps at the end of a mangrove-lined creek off Missionary Bay, thereafter to make the best of the five days before us till another boat would pick up our human remains from George Point, opposite the immense sugar jetty at Lucinda. For myself, I hadn't been up a hill of any size since a school trip to the English Lake District as a sixteen year-old. Most of my walking is done behind a supermarket trolley, and most of my climbing is out of bed. I am also the possessor of a pair of legs like pipe-cleaners and a small but resurgent tobacco dependency. Hardly an ideal candidate for the great outdoors, you might say.

It is one of Napoleon's least-treasured quips that all his soldiers saw of Russia in 1812 was the packs of the men in front of them. Our predicament was not as desperate as that, but it is true a person becomes highly fixated on his luggage when he has it permanently strapped to his shoulders. Other people's luggage, too. My pack was reasonably neat but abominably heavy; other members of the team seemed to have more attached to the exteriors of their packs than put away inside. One of us was carrying things that would provoke disbelief as they

were produced in the days to come: bottles of wine, jars of antipasti and capers (capers!), tins of tomatoes, and enough Nutella in individual foil-sealed portions to sink a battleship. My wife and I had packed with puritanical caution, and were frequently prostrated by our loads. How could our friend stride on as he did, mile after mile, with a pack I could barely lift off his back? If we had to bend under a fallen tree we found ourselves prone like an upended turtle; if we hit a branch to the side of the track we span around like ninepins; if we tilted our necks to drink from our bottles we virtually fell over backward.

Inevitably, food, too, became a major preoccupation — in part because it contributed so much to weight. Here the rule seems to be the more experienced the hiker the more baroque his or her culinary imagination. While my wife and I carefully steamed up our parsimoniously sized evening meals we watched in amazement as one friend cooked up rice, curry sauce, dried peas and corn, dried mushrooms, tofu, and tuna in a series of pots over which he hung like a benevolent wizard or a TV chef; or as another made sandwiches of ginger nut biscuits and Nutella, drizzled them with Grand Marnier, and drowned them in custard. We had made an elementary mistake: it is not home cooking you should seek to replicate under such circumstances, but restaurant food. Anything else is an admission of defeat.

In one area admissions of defeat were outside everyone's control. The weight of your pack and the scope of your culinary ambitions are governed by choice. How much sleep you get is governed by the camping Gods, who are as arbitrary a bunch of divinities as those which decided the fate of Troy. You may go to your tent as exhausted as a pack-mule; you may believe you are about to lay down your weary head in the bowl of rice you can barely see by torchlight at supper-time: but the amount of shut-eye you receive is nevertheless in inverse relation to the amount of shut-eye you confidently expect. We were extremely fortunate on our walk: two years of droughty wet seasons had left the creeks dry and the insect populations for which the island is famous low, and the campsite rats were in remarkably short supply. But sleeping under canvas is a fragile pursuit, and alcohol is no solution whatsoever. (I carried half a bottle of Johnnie Walker, which disappeared all too soon; others carried bladders of wine; none of it made the slightest difference to our sleep patterns. Port — a product from which drinkers rightly run a country mile in my experience — seemed to get the balance of weight to impact about right. I proffer this as travel advice.)

But what of the scenery? What of what we went to see? I have left this to last because it is the hardest feature to describe. We took five days to tramp those 30 kilometres; some walkers do it in three: more a reflection of their capacity to endure pain and suffering, I imagine, than their capacity to appreciate the beauties of nature. Even at our snail-like pace, travelling hopefully outweighed

arriving, to my mind; or outweighed sitting about and taking it all in, at any rate. There were two rainforest pools which earned the plaudits of rainforest pool connoisseurs, and rightly so. More spiritually significant as far as I was concerned were the beaches, which were stark and pristine as all beautiful beaches must be, but which took on an enhanced quality in those regards when you realized three dozen others were all you were sharing the entire island with. An Australian beach without a car park is a rare and welcome phenomenon, even in the tropical North. The northern beaches of Nina and Little Ramsay bays were exquisite, and whereas Zoe Bay was not a place for swimming the creeks at either end were as ethereally still and pure as could be. But the loveliest landscape of all was the most unexpected: a kind of hillside heath (reminiscent of Sydney's West Head, only more tropically fulsome) of banksias (rare blue ones; not in flower, alas), grass-trees, she-oaks, and granite outcrops, constantly tossed by the breeze. One of the things I discovered on the hike was that this latter kind of scenery inspires me a good deal more than the rainforest so many visitors to this part of the world come to see. Rainforest may be the cradle of the biosphere and so forth, and its protection may be one of the imperatives of our age, but it is a dark and gloomy place to tramp through, mile after mile, and to sleep within. Give me strong sunlight and a gumtree any day.

The other thing I discovered on Hinchinbrook Island was far less expected: that *Bleak House* really is my favourite Dickens novel. I carried my late father's Oxford India Paper edition of this behemoth — fully as *sui generis* a performance as Hinchinbrook itself, in its different sphere of operations — with some care, given its rarity and emotional value, but it proved far tougher than I did. Absolutely everybody and everything in the book hit me equally as hard and as successfully, which has not been my experience in recent bruisingly one-sided encounters with Dickens. The oleaginous evangelist Mr Chadband, for example: I can't see him as a Hinchinbrook hiker or an aficionado of banksias. Least of all an enthusiast for campsite cooking. ("Do we need refreshment then, my friends? We do.") But even preposterous Mr Chadband is vouchsafed a kind of human wisdom: one so fundamental you have to walk 30 kilometres with 20 kilos on your back to know what it is. "I say, my friends ... why can we not fly? Is it because we are calculated to walk? It is. Could we walk, my friends, without strength? We could not. What should we do without strength, my friends? Our legs would refuse to bear us, our knees would double up, our ankles would turn over, and we should come to the ground." A sense of beauty is one thing you carry away from the Hinchinbrook walk — and a sense of achievement, too.

