

VANCE PALMER

WHITSUNDAY PASSAGE

Travelling north by boat, the first suggestion of the Great Barrier Reef comes to one in rather a sinister way.¹ A white lighthouse² appears above the horizon and near it a squat black shape, which soon takes on the lines of a foundered ship. It is the *Cooma*, well known to most people on the coast once, and now an empty shell, held so securely below that she seems to be at anchor in placid waters.³ The rising wall of the Barrier guards her from the breakers so that she will be a long while in breaking up, and will probably remain for years as a warning to navigators of what a little miscalculation means in these coral-strewn seas.

But in spite of that skeleton in the gateway it is easy to forget, moving north, that you are within the Barrier. The seas are not notably smoother than in other places. Often in mid ocean they are less ruffled. One remembers long periods, day after day between Perth and Colombo, or San Francisco and Sydney, when the vast bulk of the Pacific had an oily skin that was not broken by as much as a ripple. Sometimes, they say, the Barrier waters are like that, but rarely. The alternation of breezes from the sea and land keeps them dancing. And often they are whipped by storms.

It is the appearance of High Peak Island that reminds you of where you are. A green pyramid, it rises from the sea in an arresting way, as if it had thrust itself up from below the surface during the night. No mere featureless mound of sand this, but a genuine volcanic island! It is the beginning of an archipelago as beautiful as can be found in any sea. For sixteen hours one passes island after island, green symmetrical; some so small that the eye takes them in at a glance, others large enough to hold sheltered bays and run herds of cattle, with peaks that touch the clouds nearly 2000 feet above sea-level. And the strange thing is that, luxuriant though they look, they are uninhabited or nearly so. Very occasionally you catch sight of a substantial house, roofed with red-painted iron in some crescent of bay. A motor launch rocks at anchor; a plume of smoke ascends in a light spiral against a background of green. In other places you glimpse the fugitive huts of solitary fishermen. And from general knowledge you are aware that the beaches of, say Lindemann Island have been trodden by all sorts of people, and that sober teachers lead parties of schoolgirls there during the winter vacation.

QUIET, NOT GRANDIOSE

Yet the abiding impression is one of having broken into an unknown world. The islands are so thickly studded, the passages between them so narrow and intricate. It is easy to retain the illusion of being the "first that ever burst into that silent sea." What wouldn't one give to have a motor launch and six months' leisure in which to explore those secret bays and quiet channels? It is not enough to see them from a steamer's deck surrounded by sleepy people who wander up from their cabins with field glasses and speculate upon the height of this peak or the nature of that object on the beach.

But there is the inevitable tourist with a touch of liver, who makes comparisons:

"Yes, it's pretty enough, but not quite what I expected. Nothing particularly staggering about it. Now the Blue Mountains... You couldn't compare this to some of the lookouts at Katoomba."

No, you certainly couldn't if you had any sense of the variety of things. But this sort of person lives for comparisons. He would say that a mountain thrush might sing sweetly enough, but that it hadn't the colours of a painted finch.

Perhaps the rather sugary diet of tourist-literature that such people browse upon is bad for their sensibility. In the corners of saloons and smoking-rooms they can be found stuffing themselves with the clotted adjectives. Descriptions to which everything is 'sumptuous', 'majestic', 'unsurpassable' - yet not be described in words! No wonder they look for scenery that will take their breath away at every turn.

The beauty of the Whitsunday Passage has not this grandiose character. Its note is a quiet one; the excitement that it rouses in the mind is quiet, too. Seen in the morning light, there is an enchantment about those green shapes that rise from the still water, but they belong to the everyday world, not to some romantic, ethereal one - though I believe there are legends of ships that have been lost mysteriously in the labyrinthine passages, and that one of the Molles can exhibit the wreck of a Spanish galleon that must have foundered before our coast had any known history.

PLAYGROUND FOR TOURISTS

Or was it after Cook had pioneered the way through this passage? The record of his voyage is left in the names of the islands, though they do not show much faculty for invention. He entered the passage on a Whitsunday, and so began with a name that meant something; but after that he seemed chiefly intent

on filling up blank spaces on the cart. There are the Blacksmith, Goldsmith, Silversmith Islands (every possible play on the trade of smith), together with Anvil Island and Forge Rocks. Possibly Cook himself became tired of recording his subjective emotions in the names of capes and headlands further south, and wanted a rest when he reached these quiet waters. It looks as if one of his less imaginative officers, some matter-of-fact sea-dog with not much interest in anything but getting the job done, had taken a hand in the game. And anyhow it will be a long time before the names of these islands will hold significance except for sailors, fixing the position on a chart. It is extraordinary how little has been done to make them accessible to tourists. There is only one island in the group that is provided with accommodation, and the point of departure from it is not some spot on the mainland a few miles away, but Mackay, a considerable distance to the south.

Tourists, from home, or overseas, are not an unmixed blessing for a district. They are liable to set up false standards, to interfere with the normal development – encouraging local councils to waste their substance on motoring-roads and local speculators to play with the idea of pretentious hotels and unnecessary car services. Not much of the money they are alleged to bring in is spent on productive works, and places that have once catered for tourists usually have a blight over them.

But here is a region that seems specially designed for a playground. These islands will probably never be put to an economic use: yet if a few good accommodation houses were sprinkled through them, with launches for hire and regular services to the mainland, what a boon it would be! Not only for pleasure-seekers from the south, but for the people in the hot sugar-lands along the coast. These latter, after all are the first to be considered, and they have little enough chance at present to get away from the smell of sugar.

The trouble about such developments is that they call for more capital and organisation than are usually to be found in new districts. It would be years before they could show the full result of their expenditure. In reality the work of opening up such chalets and hostels should belong to an enterprising tourist department, and the experience of Kosciusko and other places has proved that they can be a success. In recent years there has been a lot of energy spent in attracting people to the North – little enough in providing for their pleasure and comfort when they get there.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Press cutting Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Ms 1174, National Library of Australia.
- ² North Reef Lighthouse.
- ³ Large steel passenger ship ran aground North Reef near Heron Island, Queensland, on 7 July 1926.