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Introduction

“The Wollemi” is the biggest declared wilderness in New South Wales. At about 4,250 square kilometres, it covers most of Wollemi National Park and a northern portion of Blue Mountains National Park. It is partially surrounded by further tracts of national park and other reserved lands which serve to protect and enhance the natural values of the declared wilderness within. Some of these areas have wilderness values of their own, so in effect The Wollemi extends well beyond the official wilderness boundary.

It is largely trackless country containing the most rugged landscape on mainland Australia. One of the first Europeans known to have entered the area, Benjamin Singleton, was repelled by the “very high rocks and deep gullies”.

Yet it also contains pleasant and delightful hideaways. Over a century ago geologist Joseph Carne described these places as “veritable oases cradled deep in desolate stony barrenness”. Even before that they appear to have inspired the legendary “Hollow” in Rolf Boldrewood’s classic novel of 1889. Perhaps it was the oases that attracted Aboriginal people from the adjacent regions; or perhaps it was the ruggedness itself. Either way, it was a place of significance to them. It was, is, and will continue to be, their country.

Since my first venture into the Wollemi—a rather eventful undertaking by lilo and woolly jumper on the Wollangambe back in 1966—I’ve undertaken about 200 trips out there. They’ve occupied nearly 600 days, mostly in the last twenty-five years. Much of that time has been spent in the gorges with the Friends of the Colo controlling invasive weeds in that otherwise native environment. Other trips have focused on seeking and surveying Aboriginal sites, or pursuing matters of colonial and more recent history.

I once set out to write a cultural history of the Wollemi, but soon lost interest. There was nothing particularly engaging for me about, for instance, the activities of the army or the forestry industry or a multitude of other people’s bushwalks and canyon trips. These things seemed trivial compared with the elusive long history that went before. Besides, a chronological history was written back in 1978 by Peter Prineus: in doing so he was driven by the urgency of saving the place from threatening developments.

What engaged me far more were the stories of particular people: those of various ilk who have, for one reason and another, wandered the Wollemi. It’s fun to “discover their tracks”—to stand at the spot where a trackbuilder came to a dead-end on a cliff or a geologist discovered a particular outcrop or a poet was inspired to write about the nation. But there’s more. Why did each of those people go there? What did they do and how did the remote and wild environment affect them? These are the sorts of questions that have driven me as I too have wandered.

To walk in remote places, in solitude or with only a few good friends, is not the same as “doing” a typical bushwalk along an established track. There’s no guide or guidebook to follow: the guide is the country itself and the discoveries made along the way. Providing you’re out there with open eyes, open mind and open heart, it’s an exploration of landscape, of natural history, of human history—and of oneself. For me, the search for the spirits of past wanderers is inseparable from the search for myself. We are all fellow travellers who at various moments have passed by in that wonderful time machine that is wilderness.

A chapter of Don Watson’s 2014 book *The Bush* is entitled *An asylum for lost souls*. He points out that while “prolonged solitary exposure to the Australian bush” might bring some lives into “perfect harmony or grace”, it makes others “odd or crazy”. Watson proceeds to describe the odd or crazy wanderings of various souls. In the case of one Arthur Ashwin, he observes that while Ashwin was a “purposeful” wanderer, “his journeys were less a quest for treasure or employment than an expression of the psyche, or a form of therapy”.

When I look at the people whose stories are told in this book I recognise that some do seem lost to an extent, or they’re on a search of some kind. Maybe they’re seeking therapy. I wonder whether the Wollemi might not be a Watson Asylum.

Indeed, am I an inmate myself?

But who is *really* lost? When in the bush I look at the parlous state of the world beyond—its social, cultural, environmental condition—and I think, no, the lost souls are not here in the bush, they are out there in the wider world. My fellow travellers in wilderness might seem eccentric, but that all depends on perspective. The asylum for lost souls is the city, a place of true loneliness, delusion and disconnectedness. Souls disconnected from each other and from nature. Worse, the asylum for lost souls seems now to be the whole human world. Witness, for example, the tragic disconnect between the recognised need to act urgently to limit climate change and the shallow human behaviours that persist at both personal and societal levels.

In contrast, wilderness is a place of sanity, of self-discovery, of connection. A place of silence, of soul, of spirit, of wonder. Of mystery. Call it what you like. As was said of Cecil Poole, my favourite Wollemi wayfarer: “He hated the shams of civilisation, always adhering to the oft-proclaimed belief that to be near Nature was to be nearer God”.

Speaking of mystery, this is in no way a guidebook. For reasons that may emerge as you read the stories, I often refrain from giving much away in terms of precise routes and locations. I’m sure if you’re a keen explorer you’ll figure those things out for yourself. Feel free to do so: on the way you’ll no doubt make your own discoveries, and you’ll find your own way to connect with the country. Perhaps you’ll keep your discoveries under your hat, so generations of future explorers can make those discoveries for themselves. And make their own connections. I wish you joyous and meaningful wayfaring.

But for now, come and meet my friends in the wilderness.