The Bush

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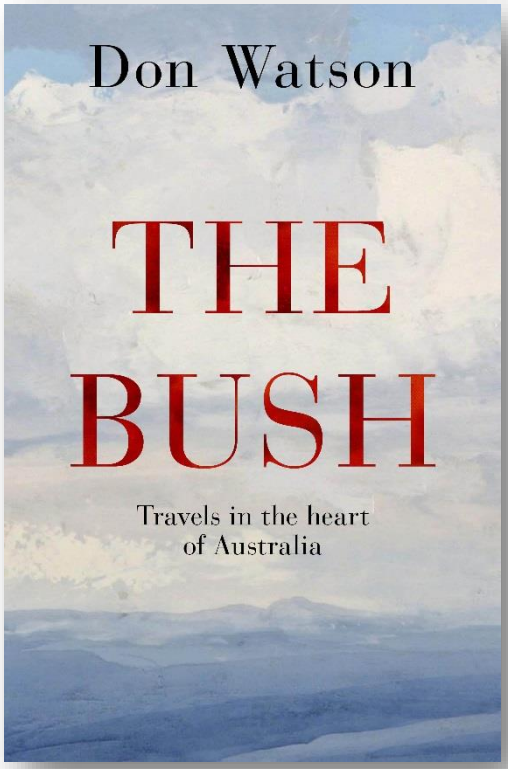

Everyone

Was Happy

the fuschia and the tree fern – the grandmother, the creek and the eel – a forest and how to clear it – a world of fire and ash – the lyrebird in the gully – snakes and other terrors – the bush becomes something else

I remember my mother's father in a tattered hat and trousers tucked in his rubber boots, striding like Hiawatha across the paddock from his cowshed. I remember her mother sweeping. He strode, she swept. She swept as if not to sweep might let the devil onto the back veranda. Every morning she beat the gum leaves and cypress debris from those boards, and then from the steps that ran down to the garden, and the path that led past the vegetables and currant bushes and the lucerne tree that blocked out a view of the milking shed and the pig pen, one side of which was a fallen tree trunk. And on to the back gate, the woodheap, and the lavatory in the shade of the cypresses – a grim watchtower with a bench seat of well-worn planks from which one could see through the cracks in the door to the chopping block, the place where the old house had been before the great bushfires of 1898, and the distant blue-green hills. Everywhere she wielded the broom with elbow grease and grim purpose. The back veranda was her frontier, those steps the ramparts of her civilisation.

The front veranda she swept less often. Like most front verandas in the Australian countryside, it was not much used. The front garden with the big white azalea, the bee-bush and the foxgloves she kept in good order, as she did the side one with the snapdragons, cineraria and wall flowers, but all visitors save inexperienced travelling sales- men, Jehovah's Witnesses, and city motorists with flat tyres or boiling radiators came in by the back door. She would say, 'I expect the men will be in soon,' and the men would come lumbering up the steps. 'The men' were her husband and sons and they came in for lunch – called dinner – and morning and afternoon tea. They moved with the stiff- backed, stiff-buttocked gait of farmers everywhere, scattered the flies from their backs with their hats, let the wire-screen door slap behind them on its rat-tail spring and sat down in the kitchen with a sigh or a groan. The groan was partly because their joints and muscles ached with effort, partly from habit, and partly in imitation of their elders. It was a noise from deep within the culture. There had been no house fifty years earlier; no farm thirty years before that. But the sense of the house and the farm and the people was that they had always been there.

The meat safe was on the back veranda. So were the copper, the bootjack and boots and, enclosed at one end, the bath. On Christmas Day we sat on the veranda and steps and ate our dinner. In the shade on one side of the steps stood the fuchsia, a native of South America where hummingbirds make love to it, but here it gets by with spine- bills and honeyeaters. On the other side was a tree fern, brought up from the creek, orphaned and out of place among weatherboards and cypresses, but thriving just the same. There were always a few blue bottles crawling on the boards with their bulbous translucent back ends sticking up, and a couple of native bull ants, and an imported blowfly buzzing about waiting for its dose of Flytox. One year the grasshoppers were bad and they hopped all over our dinners, and another the steps were stained with the green flesh of caterpillars. Our elders remembered a year when the train couldn't make it up the rise to Thorpdale because of the caterpillars on the rails. But they had been worse in the very early years: no sooner had the land been cleared of its ancient vegetation and sown down with grass than caterpillars came and ate the farms clean as the streets of Melbourne, and the cattle starved.

The smallest thing can excite the image of that veranda and my grandmother treading it, as inexorable as a ghost. The smell of milk, cream, meat and pastry. Cypresses and gums baking in the sun or stewing in the damp. Rubber boots and dogs stained red by the soil. Flyspray. Trout. The smell on the days she washed and threw the boiling water from the copper on the boards and scrubbed it off with her broom. At certain times there was the smell of just-made jam: melon, raspberry, plum, quince. Farming families made great quantities of jam and ate it every day; they ran on sugar, along with flour, salt, oats, meat, peas, beans and potatoes. And butter and eggs, and pumpkins, swedes and scones. We ate like aristocrats. It was a veranda of smells and tastes and either will bring it back. Made by my mother in the way her mother did, a scone will do for my memory what that madeleine of his Aunt Léonie's did for Marcel Proust's.

The leaves of the gum tree are slightly convex and either long and pointy or sickle-shaped – both designs for retaining moisture. They hang vertically and provide scanty canopies that let the light in and make the forest less shadowy than the woods of the Northern Hemisphere. Their oil glands give the bush not only its distinctive smell, but, on hot days when the oil vaporises, the beloved 'blue distance', as Miles Franklin called it. The same oil makes the leaves highly combustible and being shaped also to catch the wind, once alight, they are adept at spreading fires. Only rarely is the ecological strategy suited to the domestic one. While gum leaves lying on their backs fly away at the merest touch of the broom, leaves face down move only after several slaps, as if to show that the bush will not surrender to women and fuchsias. Yet it is possible that deep in the thoughts that accompanied her daily ritual, my grandmother's banging of her broom had more to do with the design of her own life than with nature's. If the Tom Collins of *Such is Life* had wandered onto her veranda on a bad day, he might have seen in my grandmother a little of his puritanical Mrs O'Halloran, who had 'explored the depths of male worthlessness'. There was, Tom added, 'no known antidote to this fatal enlightenment'.

Tough as she was in almost everything, she was also phobic and superstitious. Crossed knives at the kitchen table portended a family fight. Spilled salt meant bad luck. To have lilac in the house was to invite death or some other calamity. It might have come from her English side, which had left London with the second and third fleets. They were convicts, though it seems no one ever told her, and she handed on to us a tale about their arrival from which the unwelcome facts had been carefully excised. Snakes and lightning frightened her in equal measure and she never tired of warning us about them. The first growl of thunder put her in a state, and as the black clouds swarmed closer she drew the curtains, covered the mirrors and the cutlery. She always said the storms had been much worse when she was a child and some of the forest was still standing. The night frightened her as well, or at least to be alone in it did, though she didn't mind sending a grandchild on his own to that stygian lavatory, to sit there in the blackness hardly daring to breathe, waiting for some venomous thing to crawl from among the toilet paper in the old saddlebag nailed to the wall.

I'm not sure that my grandmother would have said she loved the bush: it was not the kind of thing she was given to saying about anything or anyone, and her husband, Rechabite and member of the Orange Lodge, was even less inclined to it. There was a drinking side to the family and an anti-drink side: she was anti-drink, like her mother, who ran the Temperance coffee palace. But neither side, as far as I could tell, were much given to hugging or throwing kisses. Whatever affection they had for the natural environment, and what- ever regret they felt about its passing, was buried beneath their fear of it and their uncompromising purpose – to pay the bills and feed and clothe their children. Their objectives were not aesthetic or revelatory or spiritual, even if they were sometimes encouraged in their efforts by Biblical injunctions to tame the wilderness, to live by the sweat of their brows and so on. If not in doctrine, in psychology they were at least half Calvinist in the bleak manner of the Scottish east whence in the main they sprang.

But farmers of all religious and cultural varieties incline to the hard matter of fact and to the phlegmatic. They live with the apparently loveless conception of cows, sheep and pigs, and with the death of them, and with the weather and failed crops. When needs must, they will destroy a forest and live with the weeds, pests and regrowth that follow in its train, and any guilt or doubt that might invade their consciences. To be a farmer, first let the iron into your soul: if dejection should also get in before you close the gate it, too, is part of your lot. To deflate hope, squash excitement and expect awfulness is emotional insurance. It is not practical to mourn the death of a wombat or bandicoot: one may as well mourn the pig that owes its existence to your liking for bacon. A good dog one may mourn a little, because a good dog is a loyal servant to men and women and seems to understand their needs, but one should never make a fuss about these things.

A few of the native birds went on singing after their forest was gone and there was little left to pollinate – the grey thrush, the song thrush, the butcherbird: and the wrens, silver-eyes, thornbills and fantails that flitted about happily, as if in denial. Every few years a pair of whipbirds came up from the creek to the garden and tried to build a nest under the shrubs. The world's songbirds originated in Australia. Nightingales and mocking birds have Australian ancestors. Especially in the early morning, a gully in a mountain ash forest might easily be taken for the nursery of the whole extended singing family.

In the daily contest with nature the women were as determined as the men, as faithful to the cause. But the women made exceptions of the surviving birds. They talked to them, treated them in the garden as companions and friends; saw in them, possibly, intimations of grace. Their sweet and friendly calls, their balletic nectar-sipping sensuality, their brilliance were hints of another, dreamed-about dimension. I think it was the women's greatest pleasure to make their gardens borders between those two worlds – theirs, the world as it was; and the birds', the world as it had been, before the Fall.