

## Voicing the Land – 2

ERIC ROLLS

I've been singing Australia all my life. It's such a wondrously different place to celebrate. It spent seventy-five million years on its own, building itself as it liked, before it was confronted by intelligent and manipulating human beings about 150,000 years ago. Since that time it adapted wonderfully to the organisation of Aboriginal Australians who used fire to turn it into what many first Europeans described as a wild-flower garden. But for the last two hundred years it has exhibited the bewilderment and pain of being confronted by Europeans who totally misunderstood it. Instead of managing what was there to encourage what they wanted as Aboriginal Australians had done, they unsettled it with foreign plants and animals that behaved with outlandish vigour.

It is Australia's aloofness as well as its difficulties that fascinate me. It has so many marvels but you may not go anywhere in expectation of seeing one. If you are there perhaps you'll see something, once in a lifetime.

When I first took up a soldier settlers' block on the Namoi River out of Boggabri, I was told that fish sometimes came to the surface during a muddy rise. It took twenty years of watching to see it, first by me alone, then by me and my wife, then by both of us and three children. And when it came it came so unexpectedly we almost missed it. There had been good rains and the five of us were down near the river collecting mushrooms. We saw cars pulling up on the opposite bank and people walking down to the river with rakes and pitchforks.

'What's going on?' I called.  
'The fish are coming up.'

There had been heavy storms upstream that we didn't know of. They had fallen on newly ploughed land and much soil had washed into the river. We drove home for gaffs and bags to put fish in. When we got back the river was almost a banker. The water was as thick as cream, sliding along rather than flowing. Along the water's edge shrimps in millions had formed a crust about thirty centimetres wide and fifteen centimetres deep. It looked like a blanket folded back over the water. Yabbies began forcing their way up through the shrimps, little brown ones, middle-sized blue ones, black ones bigger than we knew existed. They propped themselves upright on the yabbies and seemingly absentmindedly occasionally reached down with a cruel claw and chopped a shrimp in half. Turtles long-necked and short-necked blundered through the shrimps and came ashore, then came water rats to stand dripping on the bank while they watched us. Occasionally we saw the nose of a fish break the surface and disappear.

The water grew suddenly muddier and all at once the fish came up, thousands of them, more than we had ever imagined in the river. They lined up shoulder to shoulder: catfish, yellowbelly, silver perch, Murray cod, mouths poking out of the water behind the shrimps and sucking air in audible gulps. They were of all sizes, fingerlings two centimetres long, catfish fifty centimetres long, Murray cod a metre long. They

stayed on display for about an hour then the water cleared a little, the fish dived, shrimps and yabbies dived, turtles and water rats splashed back in. And there was an ordinary river flowing with brown water.

I told that story in *The River*. The once beautiful Namoi is now little but an irrigation canal, the many water weeds are gone, so are most of the native fish. No one might ever see that sight again. If it happened anywhere it would be mostly European Carp that would come up.

Australia's resurrection plants are one of the world's marvels. There are little Rock Ferns that grow among White Cypress Pine in the Pilliga forests of northern New South Wales. After several months of drought they seem to die. They are unrecognisable as ferns, they are clumps of shiny, chocolate-coloured, brittle bare stalks with the centre stems showing a few shrivelled, light green balls attached to them. Touch one of those balls lightly. Immediately it turns into green dust. Search for life on the ground. There is sand, dead leaves, a few dry twigs. There is probably also what was a clump of moss. It is still greenish but it, too, crumbles at a touch. Not even a magnifying glass can find a suggestion of life.

Take out twenty litres of water and pour it over the fern. It will dampen an irregular patch about forty centimetres wide. Walk away and come back in twenty minutes. From a distance of thirty metres the patch will look green. Scallop-edged thalli of a moss, two centimetres long, one broad, will lie flat on the ground close enough to touch one another. The clump of moss will be a healthy plushy cushion with a pile 1.5 centimetres high. Five hours later it will have set spores. The other moss will already have distributed its spores and shrivelled again. It will be difficult to find any trace of it. Another longer-lived moss with dark green thalli in the form of fans will have taken its place. By next morning the fern will have come to life. Every little ball of green dust will have unfurled into a living frond. It seems exactly as though blood has flowed into a mummy.

I wrote about those plants in *Celebration of the Senses*.

The Hale River east of Alice Springs is usually a river of dry sand. But that country averaging only two hundred and fifty millimetres of rain a year has more creeks feeding the rivers than any coastal valley. Whenever there is a rare downpour the soil cannot absorb the water quickly enough. Creek joins creek joins river in wild flood and the Hale roars down its gorges tossing logs in the air. And all that furious water has nowhere to go. It floods out into the so-called Simpson Desert ninety kilometres away.

In thousands of floods through thousands of years, the Hale cut down through rock to reveal an astonishing mural at Ruby Gap. A cliff thirty metres high, half a kilometre long pictures an event which took place three hundred and twenty million years ago. An underground disturbance suddenly heaved up a big area. Huge slabs of rock slid one on the other.

Molten greenschist ran between the layers, acted as a lubricant, and the speed of the slide accelerated. Soft rock slammed against hard rock, bending, curving, rolling into coils. The cliff pictures it all in full colour. One can still see the dent where one mass struck and the lines of greenschist circling round the soft folded rock.

As I sat watching it in wonder I chanced to look down. A Fire-tailed Skink was running through the grass beside me. It was a tiny thing, the tail was no more than twenty millimetres long. Yet it was so bright and moving so fast it seemed to leave a trail behind it. I could look up, look down between millions of years of marvels.

I told that story in the book *Doorways*.

It is a wonder to watch rain falling on dry ground. In the central red country it is an experience of all the senses, especially that of smell. As the first few drops dent the soil with audible smacks, the sharp smell of growth-promoting acids lifts into the air. When rain falls on dry black soil, each damp particle swells and puffs up. As it rises, dry soil trickles from it, then it too rises as a raindrop hits it. The whole surface of the paddock stirs about in welcome. It takes a lot of rain to swell the subsoil and fill the cracks. I once walked through half a metre of floodwater that had covered one of our river paddocks for three days. I heard a loud gurgling noise and walked across to see what it was. Water still swirled down a crack so quickly that the hollow cone of the whirlpool was about twenty centimetres across at the top. How deep and how far was all that water going?

Once black soil begins to dry a little after a thorough soaking it sticks like toffee, particle to particle. When fencers used hand tools they had to carry a bucket of water, two shovels and a scraper if they had to clean out post holes in black soil. Sheep collect nests of mud and grass on their hooves. Too often they don't fall off and they dry into heavy boots. One has to catch the unfortunate sheep in the paddock—they can't run—and crack the brick hard encrustations off. An undersized, long-haired, long-tailed steer amongst a mob I bought for fattening collected so much mud on the tassell of his tail as he dragged it about the paddock that he was finally anchored by a thirteen-kilogram ball. A Shetland pony that we brought from the gravelly soil of Tenterfield behaved like a cat with honey on its paws on the first rainy day. Shetlands are more intelligent and more unpredictable than any other breed of horse. He finally sat down on his haunches and held his front hooves before his nose while he inspected them and smelt them.

I told of black soil in *They All Ran Wild*. I was then farming it.

The greatest song of the land is the food it produces and settlers have always taken the food they know with them. One cannot blame European settlers for bringing in the livestock and plants that have done so much damage here, it would have been unnatural for them to settle in a new country without the food that they knew. Many explorers brought new foods back to their own countries. When the Spaniards invaded Mexico they found chocolate, so precious to the Aztecs that they used the beans as money. The adventurers took chocolate back to Spain in 1519 and from there this supremely delicious sweetmeat quickly spread across Europe. Chocolate is good food, it keeps the blood flowing feely through the arteries, but that is quite the wrong reason for eating it. But in the sixteenth century when so much work was hard labour chocolate had even more value as a foodstuff; being fifty percent fat it supplied energy.

The little Red Jungle Fowl of Indonesia, killed when they are a year or two old, have a delicious flavour that comes through the strong spices cooked with them. For hundreds of years island fishermen have carried them aboard for eggs and meat, coming ashore in northern Australia more often than is usually realised, bringing their pens of hens with them to get a pick of grass. The roosters travel as living weathercocks, chained to the top of the masts whenever the boat is running. It is believed that they crow when they sight land.

Columbus brought sweet potatoes to Europe. The Maoris brought them to New Zealand and invented myths to explain them. Rongo, the god of cultivated plants, stole it from the heavens and gave them to man. They came to Japan in the seventeenth century and spread throughout the land in the eighteenth, making it possible

for people to populate isolated islands regarded as too poor to support life. Because so many poor families came to depend on them, sweet potatoes became a symbol of survival.

There are many varieties of sweet potatoes growing in Australia, especially in Queensland. Travellers and traders from Papua New Guinea brought some in, most came in during the grim days of blackbirding when thousands of islanders were snatched from their homes to work on sugar plantations. Some of them somehow brought in a few tubers of their staple food. I told those stories in the three books *A Celebration of Food and Wine*.

Now I'll tell you a story that seems to come out of the soil. Elaine and I went to Ireland to hear a shrnchi, a traditional storyteller. But were we too late? 'Faith now, you should have been here the week before the week before last because that's when Mary McGee died and she could tell stories for long hours and days on end. Or better still you should have been here a full year ago and a few months before that because then Padraic Coulhoun could have told you stories that would stop your heart for long seconds.'

Somebody in a pub mentioned Donal ó'Murchú. "E be down in Kerry, down a bit.' So we went down a bit and up a bit and around a bit, but Donal ó'Murchú wasn't there. 'Donal ó'Murchú, is it? Well, there 'e be.' But there he wasn't, until at last we saw a tall man in gumboats walking up from his cowshed. I went to speak to him, 'Donal ó'Murchú?' 'That I be.' 'We've come from Australia hoping to hear a story.' "Ave yez now? Well come in, all of yez.'

It is necessary to see Kerry because that is what talked to us. There are fuchsia and furze hedges, and stone fences walling in a thousand years of history. Clouds float in from the sea, collect on the hill tops, then roll along them and cover up the peaks until the hills all look the one height. The sun pours into the valleys between the rows of white clouds. The clouds roll all the way up to the mountains below Killarney. There they grow heavy with moisture and they tumble back down the valleys, filling them with rain while the hills warm their rocks in the sun. Potatoes grow between the rocks on hillsides where you'd never think potatoes could grow, and the ground is always dug with the right foot on the shovel. 'What foot does he dig with?' is always asked. That distinguishes an Irishman from a Sassenach.

Kerry is a green land and windy and Gaelic is the best language to stand up against the wind. Donal began talking to us in Gaelic. He said he couldn't think in any other language, but he would tell us a bit then translate it. His English sounded much like his Gaelic and in the end it didn't seem to matter, we understood him in both languages. This is a story Donal told us, it is in the new book of flesh, of fish, of fowl.

John Denning had ten sons and no daughters, there was never a girl in with them. He had four cows. The fishing had failed after Christmas, there was no such thing as bread or potatoes or fish. The boys, they was three years old to fifteen and they was hungry.

Well this day, it was the first month of spring, they was to plant the potatoes but how was they to eat. His wife told him to go to his merchant and ask him for five punt the ton and he would sell his potatoes. The merchant wouldn't pay. John tried to sell them in the town, nobody wanted potatoes. They was good potatoes, the size of his fist. Each one would cut five eyes. He took them and cooked them. Then they was gone and the boys and their mother and himself, they was starving.

He got out his old rotten fishing net that he had thrown into a bit of a shed and he set it in the river. And when he pulled it in, he could hardly pull it in. There was a trout in every mesh of it. Welcome be the will of God. He had to cut the mesh to get all the fish out. He told his wife he had a load of fish for the market and he took them down and got twenty punt for them. And he never looked back from that day on.