Chapter 1: The Caldera

The womb-like basin of Terania Creek with its narrow cervix of an entrance faces south. In its moist embrace lies a rainforest little-changed for more than forty-five million years. On the easternmost part of Australia, it survived the drifting continent's climatic shifts and a hundred and fifty years of timber-getting. In 1979 some claimed it was the last unlogged rainforest and should be saved, but for the foresters and sawmillers it was the last rainforest they would plan to log. The dispute over logging flared into the Rainforest War across New South Wales. Today forest protests are part of Australia's political landscape, but Terania Creek was the first.[2] This story is about the people from both sides who fought over the rainforest, but the enduring player in the story is the rainforest itself.

The life-forms in the rainforest seem exotic. Enter the forest and you find mottled tree trunks soaring to crowns high in the canopy, supported by elegantly curved or plank-like buttresses, taller than a man, smaller trees with no buttresses at all, and trees with tumbling bifurcating trunks that grow downwards to the ground, encircling and strangling the small trees that give them support. You crouch to avoid the tangle of creepers as thick as a forearm, and the vines, some armed with hooks, which loop between the trees. You stand under tree ferns several metres tall, with their fragile fronds and insubstantial stems protected by the high humidity and dense shade under the forest's multiple canopy layers. And in a quiet moment you hear the startling stereophonic calls of a whip-bird and its mate.

Where more light enters the forest, clusters of palms with pale stems support large green fronds, and your ears are assaulted by the noise from thousands of cicadas. Close by in a forest gap a small tree with hand-sized, heart-shaped leaves bullies others for the light; the undersides of its leaves hide potent stinging needles. Most tree trunks in this forest are mottled with clumps of brilliant-green mosses and grey-green scabs of lichen whose functional development, frozen in time, pre-dates their hosts by hundreds of

millions of years. Occasionally, you see startling masses of delicate flowers held in small clumps on the mottled trunks. When the flowers are finished they fall to the forest floor, and join red or purple clusters of fleshy fruits discarded from high in the canopy. They make halos of brilliant colour on the background of dark decaying leaves where you tread. Among the debris on the forest floor are fungal hyphae whose primitive role of decomposition remains unchanged since plant life moved out of the oceans and onto land, and when conditions are right fragile and exotically-coloured 'mushrooms' rise above ground to perpetuate their existence.

Stand still for a while and all the senses are alerted. The forest canopy's kaleidoscope of greens, and flashes of yellow from small social clouds of butterflies. Sweet floral fragrances and foetid odours of decay. A light breeze cooling moist skin, and the tactile warmth of the bark of a rainforest giant. Trickling water and bird calls echoing through the columnar trunks. But stand still too long and leeches will seek out your blood, move too fast and a vine will hook your flesh, brush a shrub and parasitic ticks will adopt you as a host, and brush a stinging tree and the pain will last for days. Without knowing, you move in a cloud of fungal spores, so dwell too long in the rainforest and you will join the food chain.

Life-forms in the rainforest appear exotic because they are so very different from the now prolific *Eucalyptus*[3] and *Acacia* forest trees that evolved from Gondwanan rainforest DNA. The new forests, adapted to fire and dry climate, are commonplace, and their rainforest ancestors are now rare.

Twenty million years ago the rocks that make up Terania Creek basin were part of an active volcano 100 km in diameter and 2 km high. When the volcano became dormant, water and wind scoured away the soft young rocks of the cone and a river breached its eastern rim, cutting a path to the sea. At Terania Creek,[4] on the southern rim of the eroded cone, the rocks became exposed like layers in a cake: the central filling of white resistant rhyolite rock sandwiched between red basalt lavas.[5]

In geological terms the eroded dish, surrounded by the remnants of the cone, is a caldera, a Spanish word for a cauldron. Today, the caldera is about 30 km from rim to rim, and marked by mountain

ranges bearing the names McPherson[6], Tweed[7] and Nightcap.[8] Now, at just a quarter of the original height of the cone, the caldera marks the easternmost point of the Australian land mass, near Byron Bay, and is the first point on the mainland to catch the morning sun. The Tweed River drains the interior of the caldera, which is dominated by a pillar of dark, dense rock, the remains of the volcano's magma chamber. It has been part of the traditional lands of the Bundjalung people for perhaps twenty thousand years, and they named the prominent central core Wollumbin because of its ability to attract lightning. In 1770 Captain James Cook named it Mt Warning to warn mariners of coastal reefs.

At the time of Cook's voyage, an increasingly dry continental climate had shrunk Australia's rainforests to only 1% of their original cover. Cook's party saw smoke from fires, and a landscape dominated by Eucalyptus woodland.[9] Cook's was one of several late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century voyages sent by both Great Britain and France to the southern land.[10] The scientists, naturalists and illustrators aboard these voyages did not visit the caldera, but when they travelled along the east coast of Australia they collected and catalogued many of the trees that can be found in the forests of the coastal ranges. Joseph Banks voyaged with Cook and collected many plants new to science.[11] He later became President of the Royal Society and sponsored botanists like George Caley,[12] Robert Brown[13] and Allan Cunningham[14] to continue collecting plant specimens from Australia.

Later, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Baron von Mueller[15] contributed his enormous energies to the search for economically valuable plants such as Red Cedar. But cedar-getters were already chasing its soft red timber in the rainforests along Australia's east coast. These fortune-seekers found the rainforest strikingly alien. They named the trees not by their newly acquired Latin names, but by their unique attributes, calling them Coachwood, Socketwood, Black Apple, Blueberry Ash, Velvet Myrtle and Maiden's Blush. The settlers who followed the cedar-getters cleared large areas of rainforests bordering the big rivers to the south of the caldera, and opened up the fertile floodplains for agriculture.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the rainforests and drier eucalypt forests of the caldera were logged by sawmills that grew up around the ranges, providing timber for new rural industries and housing for the expanding population of the young State of New South Wales. Soft workable timbers were harvested from remote rainforest refuges, like Terania Creek, in uncontrolled logging to supply the war effort during World War II. Bush crews returned to log the southern part of Terania Creek in the 1950s and again in 1968, but the northern part of the basin under the overhanging cliffs remained untouched.[16] Logging was sporadic and selective, and the forests regenerated and greened-over the immediate scars. But other rainforest gullies that had been too heavily logged for regeneration were clear-felled, the debris burnt, and the areas planted with Flooded Gum.[17,18]

More than two hundred years of European activity along the eastern seaboard reduced Australia's rainforests by three quarters of their pre-1770 cover, through clearing for agriculture, uncontrolled logging, and conversion to plantations. The rainforests, which covered just 1% of Australia two hundred years ago, now cover just one quarter of one percent of the Australian land mass.

The dairying industry that had flourished on the cleared slopes of the caldera was in decline by the 1970s, and young settlers moved onto the cheap farmland. In September 1973 Hugh and Nan Nicholson, two urban refugees looking for a self-sufficient lifestyle, found Terania Creek. They drove north from the hamlet of The Channon on a rough dirt road through steepening hills that forced the road to wind tightly around and through the creek on the valley floor. Just before the valley sides closed in completely they found a small patch of cleared land running a short distance upslope from the creek flats. It was the last cleared land at the end of the road, a degraded dairy farm losing ground to encroaching weeds. On the eastern boundary, across the creek, was the rainforest of Whian Whian State Forest, and on the northern boundary was Goonimbar State Forest with its tall, moist rainforest and palm communities. The forests were held in the basin of Terania Creek, ringed with cliffs below the backdrop of the Nightcap Range. It fitted all their criteria: it was a scene of exceptional beauty, an inspirational landscape, a spiritual refuge.

Then a war broke out in this most peaceful of landscapes—the Rainforest War. It started in 1979 with a battle over the rainforests of Terania Creek and spread to rainforests across the State of New South Wales. On one side were the young settlers making their homes around the caldera. On the other side were the Forestry Commission of New South Wales and the sawmills it licensed.

The new settlers were bent on protecting the forests; they felt a spiritual relationship with the rainforests, were in awe of the ancient life-forms and felt duty-bound to protect them. The Forestry Commission, in contrast, managed extensive forest regions on long cycles of cutting and regeneration according to silvicultural principles of forest management. Geographically, its focus was regional and broad, whereas that of the protesters, initially, was local and narrow; its intervention was based on science and economics while that of the protesters was based on conservation and spirituality.

The media depicted the confrontation as a battle between proponents of the environment (the city) and those of employment (the bush). The Cabinet of the Labor Government of New South Wales was split along these lines, and politicians followed the sentiments of their electorates. Voters in country towns were mostly dedicated to protecting jobs, but for the urban electorate of Sydney, a world away from the reality of the bush, the term 'rainforest' stimulated political support and an intangible affection for an idealised landscape that they defended through the ballot box.

The events that followed make up the story of the Rainforest War. It is a story that helps explain the origins of the crisis in which the forest and timber industry now finds itself. Across Australia, State Forestry Departments have lost management control of large areas of their native forests. Faced with diminishing resources, the native timber industry's very existence is under threat. The Rainforest War also marked the germination and rapid growth of a peculiarly Australian forest activism. This home-grown activism developed at the same time as a global rise in environmental awareness, but at Terania Creek it was a response to a specific threat; it was not planned, and it had no national or international precedents.

A generation later, the Rainforest War is recent enough to remain pertinent, but far enough in the past for an objective autopsy. From

a broad perspective it is a story of the forestry and timber industry under siege from growing environmental activism. At a narrower focus it is a story of slow-moving institutions outmanoeuvred by small, flexible and proactive groups who managed the media and the message with alacrity. And close-up it is a story of individuals who were devoted to their cause and believed implicitly in the justness of their actions, be they conservationist, forester, sawmiller, bush worker or policeman. But the central character of the story is the rainforest of Terania Creek, claimed by protesters as the last unlogged rainforest. Its ancient genetic lineage of buttressed trunks, soft leaves, colourful flowers and fleshy fruits appeared vulnerable and stimulated a primitive instinct in those who entered it. Like a newborn infant, the marvel of its existence inspired its own protection. It is a spiritual landscape—the living archaeology of Gondwana.