FLEETING EVENTS

Robert Rankin

Until late one afternoon in November 1996, I thought the rainforests of Lamington had few surprises left for me. But hot November afternoons are notorious for providing the right atmospheric conditions for tropical thunderstorms. That much I knew. Also, as the early summer days begin it is not really possible to predict with any degree of certainty whether a storm will develop and, even if one does, just how large it may become.

The day started out warm and clear as our small group made its way along the banks of Christmas Creek towards the grave of Jim Westray who had died in the now well-known Stinson aircraft disaster of 1937. The site of the crash high on the steep slopes of the valley is frequented most weekends by those curious enough and energetic enough to make the climb. There is little left of the wreck to see except for a few pieces of rusted metal tubing. More importantly is the need of the visitor to witness the site of the disaster in an attempt to understand what it must have been like for those involved. I'm not sure what I expected to see when I first went there, for the place is no different to any other part of Lamington's forests. Why should it be? A random event in a wild storm does not choose carefully. So if I was expecting to find either an exotic piece of rainforest or a wild, bleak and dramatically scarred site worthy of a disaster then I was to be sadly disappointed.

I reached for my camera as I often automatically do but there was nothing to photograph. A crash happens in an instant and all that remains is wreckage and now that too was mostly gone. We lined up in the forest at the small plaque marking the spot in traditional group photo style simply as a reminder of the place. There really was no other photograph of the disaster to take. Or was there? As we left and began the long descent back to the valley floor I wondered how it would be possible to capture on film something so ephemeral.

But that was another trip. Today we went past the turnoff to the crash site, past too the grave of Westray who, after surviving the crash, descended into the valley to get help. In doing so, he fell down one of many steep waterfalls and was killed. Help finally came for the two remaining survivors when Bernard O'Reilly found the wreck after searching for many days.

Today had none of the drama of the past. The forest had changed little in over half a century since that ill-fated flight to Sydney. What had changed however was our knowledge of it. Now a thin but discernible track led easily along the banks of the creek making access quick and simple. Without a track, rainforest quickly becomes physically and psychologically impenetrable.

The afternoon was steamy when we finally arrived at the high Larapinta Falls tumbling over a tough band of rock which has formed most of the large falls of Lamington. Over the roar of tumbling water it was almost impossible to hear each other speak and all other sounds of the forest were most definitely drowned out.

That is probably why we did not hear the first sounds of thunder. That the sun was still shining brightly in a perfectly blue sky also gave no hint of the impending downpour. As we scurried back down the

track the sound of the falls abated and once again the sounds of the forest took over-the gurgling creek, the birds, the insects. The air was still. The trees stood like solid giants.

It is no surprise then that I dismissed the first rumble as simply imagination. Later, when the rumble became a sharp crack resonating down the canyon, I knew that somewhere high above us and still unseen, a massive summer storm was building over the ranges.

We were strung out now over about a kilometre. The faster members of the group had gone ahead and for a while I was alone. It was only mid-afternoon yet I could barely see fifty metres. By now cloud covered most of the sky but still no rain fell. The wind continued building and a shower of stripped leaves began to fall from the canopy above. The big trees bent under the force and between thunderclaps came another sharp sound as the weaker branches cracked and fell to the floor. Lightning briefly lit up the scene and I tensed in anticipation of yet another terrifying and deafening thud from a nearby thunderclap.

I increased my pace and tried to follow the faint track in the dark. It was only four o'clock. In the darkness I occasionally lost the trail and this made me more frantic. I felt I was running from some monster and in a sense I was. Light and safety existed only at the car park at the road head and that was still a long way off.

It was too dark to take pictures. Overhead there would be the brilliant white towering castles of cloud alive with lightning flashes which do, of course, make superb photographs. But here, deep down in the valley amongst the wet leaf litter, vines and big tree trunks it is a very different picture. It is a scene more for the eyes and ears than for the camera. Like the Stinson aircraft crash, the remains of which still lie high on the slopes above me, the experience of the storm is ephemeral. How can you describe it in a single frame of film?

Such a photograph still eludes me but the scene remains clear. A picture could not do it justice or at least I still have not discovered how. But then isn't that challenge part of the excitement of photography?

Another sound suddenly fills the air as big raindrops strike the treetops and slowly filter down through the layers of foliage, splashing from leaf to leaf. Soon my clothes are saturated but that really doesn't matter in these steamy and hot conditions. I look around briefly one last time at a scene I have not witnessed before. I want to remember it. There is no telling when I might again encounter a storm like this. Then I hurry down the track to try to catch up with the others before the full deluge hits.