

## Independent scholar

### Barbara Brooks

### Bucketty diary

#### Abstract:

‘Bucketty diary’ is an extract from a journal written during visits to a cabin in the bush at Bucketty, north of Sydney, over a period of several years. At the beginning and end of the journal there are short accounts of the context of the journal. The writing observes the environment, and reflects on the experience of living close to the country, an experience like camping out. It is creative rather than critical writing, with a brief reflection at the end on influences and intentions.

#### Biographical note:

Barbara Brooks is a writer, independent scholar and lecturer in writing. Her first book, *Leaving Queensland*, was published by Sea Cruise, a small art press. She has published a biography of a major Australian novelist, *Eleanor Dark: a writer's life* (Macmillan, 1998). Her essays and stories have been published in the US, UK, Europe and Asia as well as Australia. She has received grants and fellowships from the Australia Council, Varuna, Asialink, Watermark, and Bundanon. She has a Doctorate in Creative Arts from the University of Technology Sydney, where *Verandahs*, her novel as fictional memoir, won the UTS Chancellor's Award for an outstanding thesis. Extracts have been published in *Heat*, *Griffith Review*, *Off the Edge* (a Malaysian magazine), and *Outskirts*. An extract has been chosen for an exhibition, *On Kindness: An Australia India cultural exchange*, opening at RMIT Gallery in Melbourne in March 2012, and later in Delhi.

#### Keywords:

Creative writing – Ecology – Journal – Solitude – Place – Basho

**First undated entry, 1984**

The land here is flat, for a few hundred yards, then it slopes, then falls steeply, sheer cliff in places, down to the valley. You have to abseil down a rock face, or walk a long way around to get to the bottom of the valley. But it's lovely down there – tall straight gums with dozens of cicadas on their trunks – deafening noise, tree ferns, rock lilies, springs with fresh water, the swamp, the creek. Sometimes there are stray cattle from up the creek. The map calls it the Boggy Arm of Wollombi Creek.

R is living in a shed that's half-built, open along one side. In winter it's cold at night and in the mornings, but the fire keeps us warm. I lie in bed and watch the moon behind the tree. Some nights it freezes. In the morning there's ice on top of water in the bucket, ice on the windscreen. Fog in the valleys. Gang gangs screeching in the trees. We boil water on the fire for coffee and tea.

When the sun comes out it's warmer. I make salad, chopping cabbage, onion, tomatoes, with lemon juice and olive oil. R cooks dried peas or lima beans slowly on the fire, mixes them with raw onion, olive oil, salt and pepper.

I'm coming up every week because we're building foundations for the cabin. Cabin, hut, shack, I don't know what to call it, what's the Australian word? Shed? It's one room made of wood, eight feet by twelve, lined with Tasmanian oak, with a galvanized iron roof. I bought it from a timber yard in Brookvale, where they had been using it as an office. It has shelves, a bench, and a Bankcard sticker on the window.

When we work on the foundations, we argue. R wanted to cut down a bloodwood and use that for stumps, arguing that termites didn't attack these trees. I said no, I wanted bricks. We bought bricks, mixed mortar, laid the spirit level on top of piles of bricks.

R: *You can do anything you put your mind to, it doesn't matter that you're a woman.*

(Me, silently ... *then why do I feel like I'm going to burst into tears any moment?*)

R: *Hurry up and spread the concrete before it dries.*

(... *my back hurts* ...)

R: *It's just like baking a cake.*

Me: *I can bake a cake, but if it doesn't turn out, nothing falls down.*

R: *Look underneath houses. Stumps sink, houses get propped up with bits and pieces to make them level.*

The cabin arrived on a wet day, on a semi-trailer. The truck driver drove down the hill, dumped the cabin on the side of the road, and then got bogged trying to get back up the hill on the wet clay track. R hired a bloke from the local garage to pick the cabin up and put it on the foundations. He arrived with a crane on the back of a small truck. When he picked the building up and lifted it off the trailer, I thought, oh no! The cabin was too heavy for the truck: the truck wobbled, the cabin swung from side to side. One of the windows broke as it collided with a tree. The truck got bogged and he had to put the cabin down, while we ran for bricks and quickly pushed them under it. Then he crashed through the chicken run on his way out. Neither of us said a word as he drove away. The foundations we had built were twenty yards down the hill.

### **13 March 1984**

*Construction notes: the 2' by 4' bearer for the cabin should be an inch less than 18 feet. Allow extra for overlap.*

*Window glass: 46 cm by 87 cm.*

*Remember ant capping – size?*

It took me three months to get my enthusiasm back. Friends suggested rolling the cabin down the hill on logs or pipes, joking about the way the Egyptians built the pyramids. I rang a company in Gosford who specialised in installing swimming pools. They lift the pool lining over the roof of a house and drop it into a hole in the back yard, controlling the movement of the crane down to the last inch. This job was a piece of cake for them and they lifted the cabin easily and swung it around and lowered it so it sat neatly on its stumps. T came with me to give moral support. By this time R was living in Sydney and working to get some money.

### **Second undated entry, 1984**

In the bush, the mosquitoes arrive at sunset and home in on bare ankles. The cabin holds the heat, while the air outside cools and stirs in a slight breeze. There are small movements in the undergrowth, and insects fly against the glass of the kerosene lanterns. I am conscious, from time to time, of being here on my own. The redback spider under the step, the noises in the bush, and someone using an axe a long way away.

I read about a woman who said she wouldn't live alone in the bush without a dog and a gun. Ron left a machete in the cabin for me.

### **Easter 1984**

One straight line of a spider web and four red lorikeets, frogs in the dam, bellbirds in the valley.

There's a small bird that flies in under the roof to eat insects off the rafters in the mornings; in the afternoons, a pigeon comes to be fed.

### **2 May 1984**

When I arrive, I stand still and wait for the silence.

Autumn weather – morning fogs, warm sunny days, red grevillea flowers in the bush and small yellow pea flowers in the grass.

A wallaby crosses the road ahead of me and goes crashing into the scrub. I often disturb animals, or birds, and they run ahead of me in the undergrowth – movement and rustling noises.

Woken last night by possums outside fighting, or partying; once awake, I worry about spiders. When I go out I find possum footprints under the steps of the cabin, and big prints on the track that might be a wombat.

Must get a car battery to run the radio. Remember the pile of batteries dumped at Minimata in Japan. One large battery will be better than several small ones – marginally.

I leave Ratsak in plastic dishes to get rid of the rats – it's tinted copper blue. I don't want to do this but I do.

### **21 August 1984**

*Shopping list:*

*wooden spoon*

*Alfoil*

*toasting fork*

*matches*

*scrubbing brush*

*rake handle*

*torch battery?*

### **10 September 1984**

After I've been here a while, I begin to feel the presence of the bush, in the absence of other things.

When I go to the desert, I wonder if it's because there's less to look at that the details become more significant. Is it only because we come from different country that we think the desert is empty? Think of the way the Aboriginal people know and read the country, as part of their lives. Everything has meaning. Who owns the country, which stories belong to it, where to find water and food. I've just been to Lake Eyre and Alice Springs, it's made me think about how we look at the landscape and see culture.

I think the soil here is poor. What my uncle who has an earth moving business calls *goanna country*. An anthroposophist friend says that the *etheric beings* in this country are *not unfriendly but stubborn*. You can't grow vegetables on land like this without water, persistence, and quantities of fertiliser. In summer the heat burns the plants, in winter the frost gets them. The chicory I gave R two years ago is still in his vegetable garden. Sometimes I think it's shrunk.

But it's spring and the bush is full of flowers. Is it poor soil? Yellow peas, star-shaped mauve/pink boronia, another small blue flower in the grass, purple iris, white wedding bush, pale fluffy wattle, grey spider flower, and drumsticks (isopogon).

Tonight is the spring full moon and it comes up behind the tall dead tree like white fire, then hangs off a branch like the round streetlamps along King Street. All around the valleys are full of smoke, I saw it from the main road along the ridge, and smelled it when I stopped to open the gate. Now the moonlight is almost blue, like water, so bright my shadow walks beside me on the track. Small animals hurry into the bush when they hear me. Crickets, a few mosquitoes.

The moonlight so intense it's like a thing in itself and not a quality of the landscape; it's alive, it's an element, like fire or water. It's brighter than my kerosene lanterns, and throws a white patch on the floor of the cabin.

Now when I look outside it's so bright the ground seems to reflect light the way water does.

## **2 October 1984**

I went to the dam just on sundown – three ducks swimming gracefully up the other end – and frogs. If they're a measure of the health of a landscape, this place is in good shape. A loud fart every minute or two, a lot of static from the small fry, a kind of rattle over to my right somewhere, and then under my feet something that sounds like an argument starts up, as if one frog is croaking and nagging and the other replying hesitantly. Near my feet a lizard about nine inches long slips through a crack in the log, and puts its head up to look at me. The frogs have worked themselves up to fever pitch; it's like musical night at the local pub.

When I leave, I startle the ducks and they flap away.

I've filled the kerosene lamps, soaked lima beans and cooked them with oregano and garlic, made the bed, put new batteries in the radio, lit the lamps. I put the billy on and it boils with a noise like static on the radio.

## **8 October 1984**

Full moon in two days. It's there now, before the sun goes down, like a round stone in grey water. Noises, off-stage: bell birds and other birds chattering, the big stinging horseflies that have been buzzing in and out driving me mad all day, a wind starting in the valley, and the cabin roof creaking as it cools.

I'm writing this at the table outside, it's cooler and lighter out here. Wind lifts the corner of the page.

Saw three crimson lorikeets this morning on my way to the dam – bright red breasts and head, darker blue and green on their wings. They fly from tree to tree in front of me, keeping their distance.

There were feathers floating on the dam – maybe the footprints are fox. Wallaby prints on the tracks as well. The lizard came out to watch me again. I could see small fish where the sun hits the water.

When I first came up here on my own, after R moved back to the city, the noises at night made me anxious.

When I come here now Sydney slides out and other things move in. Writing. Cooking food, eating. Walking. Cleaning the kerosene lanterns, shaking spiders out of the bedclothes.

### **10 October 1984**

In the morning, early fog in the valley, drops of water on the bushes catching the low sun, spider webs like white nets on the ground.

I walk across the road and down to the dam every evening. There are dozens of frogs again, ducks, lorikeets, crows. Lizards, wallabies. And several varieties of ants, flies, biting midges, etc.

My parents told us about the frogs that lived behind the pictures on the wall at the farm at Kallangur. They couldn't get rid of them. Eventually they tied cotton round their legs, and dumped them near the river four miles away. One found its way back.

The kerosene lantern and the coils burn most of the night, creating a kind of fog hanging low around the bed. I'm breathing it all night, and outside there's all that fresh air.

### **20 November 1984**

Something walked across the roof early this morning, before it was light. Skitter skitter skitter, then a soft thump as it hit the step, skrit skrit along the wooden steps, and whomp, it hits the ground. Possum?

I watch what looks like a bit of the bush climb the window frame – a grub inside a case made of bits of leaf and sticks. A casemoth?

A bunch of caterpillars on a leaf just outside the window are eating and crawling over one another. When I disturb the branch, they rear up and point their black and pale green tips at me, waving like a sea anemone.

White titree in flower everywhere and bees hanging around in droves.

Something swims across the dam very quickly and all I can see is a head poking out of the water. A turtle? Snake?

The mosquitoes here are fierce. They bite through clothes, even thick cotton socks. I have citronella, mosquito coils, and a net. R says there are more insects to the square foot here than anywhere else in Australia. The range is impressive: several varieties of ants, from small black to large meat ants and green ants, the ones that bite, then mosquitoes, large biting flies called horse flies or march flies, small biting flies, and a smaller biting insect like a gnat. And spiders. I found a redback on my sleeping bag one night, and a (dead) huntsman hanging from the ceiling by a thread, like a bizarre Christmas decoration.

### **19 February 1985**

Back in Sydney, typing this up, I edit it, and it changes. The editing process makes it smoother but also more contrived, less like a diary. But different priorities appear in a different environment.

When I left last week, I stood at the gate at the top of the hill looking back over the valley – it's always satisfying. It's not lush green country, nothing like a humanised European landscape. It's a dry sandstone ridge, white sandy soil with white clay

underneath. A lot of scrub. For the first time I see how beautiful banksias are, here, when I walk down the hill and see big golden bronze brushes glowing in the scrub. Wattles and titees with shallow roots. The bloodwoods and some gums grow tall. When we cut down the bloodwoods, clearing a place for the cabin, they were full of red watery sap. These trees grow on the side of the hill, and their taproot might go down a long way, through a crack in the rock to water, to the springs in the gully.

The night I left there were electrical storms all around the sky, rain along the horizon, sheet lightning and forked lightning. Bucketty was dry when I left but it was raining in the city.

I imagine myself standing there again, with Sydney behind me, in suspension, under glass.

#### **4 June 1985**

It's the first time I've been here for two months, since my car was stolen. B lent me hers; it's faster than mine on the freeway. She talks about the drive to Sydney: *Once you get on the freeway south of Newcastle it's like being on a conveyor belt.*

A dingo howled earlier tonight. A cow somewhere in the valley.

Mouse/rat shit on the table and the soap has been nibbled.

Tonight the moon's behind cloud, round and flat like one of those 1960's light fittings. Or like a white button behind the cloud, making me think of the flight of geese that set off a NATO alarm. Either the moon is heading north or the cloud is travelling south.

#### **10 June 1985**

The kerosene lamps and their glasses are like long shiny corridors of mirrors, like lighted windows, or a space I can walk into, hot, watery, flickering, with silver bases, and rising fumes.

#### **14 October 1985**

It rained heavily and steadily till midnight when I fell asleep. It was still raining hard this morning at 7am. Tree branches bend over with the weight of water. Some flowers look waterlogged, some faded and half dissolved. It stopped about 8am and the sun came out and I walked to the dam. Water ran down in channels through the bush and where the land starts to slope more steeply, the water was running fast and roaring like the sea.

More wildflowers. A small blue wild iris, bottlebrush, clusters of bronze pea flowers, a small pink pea flower on a creeping bush, yellow bottlebrush with three cornered leaves.

Birds come out after the rain. Ants busy on the ground just outside the cabin. A lizard runs up the handle of the old rake and across the wall.

### 18 December 1985

Fear of being alone is an edge to being here, but not as strong as the pleasure of solitude, what I come here for.

R is talking about selling the land.

### 22 September 1986

I arrive and it's quiet. Blue ridges, smoke in the distance.

There's been a news story about someone being busted here, and an ex-member of the Russian army, armed, at large in the bush. I'm ignoring it.

Free oranges in bins on the side of the road at Kulnura. I asked one of the local men why and he said, *The citrus company down the road's gone bad.*

When I go to bed, there's moonlight on the floor, and beside my face. Sometimes I feel as if I'm barely here. Blue smoky moonlight, white sandy tracks, sandstone and tough scrub. Nothing to disturb what is already here.

But the cabin and I are a big disturbance in the bush. Weeds grow along the track from the cabin to where I park the car.

### 27 April 1987

*tea towel*

*detergent*

*straw broom?*

*pillow cases*

I grew up in bush like this but always had a knowledge of/ longing for/eye on something else.

Can it be seven months since I was here? Bush rats nest in the cupboard, glass has fallen out of the window, someone has been through R's stuff in the shed. There are people living in the house at the top of the hill.

Coming here, to the bush, do I go loose and blurred around the edges? I remember how easy it is to live with dirt and open air, virtually no shelter. It's a bit unnerving to discover how basic things can get – and how much you can tolerate – dirt, old clothes, holes in the ground to shit in. Some barriers fall away. Like going to Central Australia and sleeping out in swags, watching shooting stars, like seeing Aboriginal people sitting in the dirt around the fire with their radios, their dogs, their blankets –

all their belongings beside them. Like the bloke who lived next door to friends, in an old bus, with carpets and old lounge chairs on the ground outside. Daily existence goes on without four walls and electricity.

That slightly unnerved feeling I have here – is it my city being gaping round the edges and letting in cold air? Not to mention ants and mosquitoes? I'm only playing at this. I



stay two days and sometimes I can't wait to get back to the Oak milk bar and the hot shower.

But I miss it when I don't come here.

### **21 September 1987**

Are they bees, these insects buzzing or whining around one another in the air, like high tension wires?

Why do I feel so happy here?

Why has R filled the cabin with aluminum ladders?

### **6 January 1988**

Deafening noise of cicadas. Hot. Slight breeze. Wattle in flower. White moonlit night, and a full moon, or nearly full, casts shadows like a streetlight. I feel slightly dull, inattentive—the irritable mindscape I brought with me.

### **31 March 1988**

There's a green spine in the middle of the grass tree where all the leaves/blades are stuck together – I touch it and they fan out, gracefully and delicately. The sapling gums have red tips. Small clouds look like puffs of smoke caught on the trees.

### **23 May 1989**

Full moon. Smoky, misty white nights, white wadded clouds in the sky like pieces of old futons. White sand, white light. Calm, but never perfectly clear.

Thin ice. The idea of thin ice with pockets of air underneath: I've been reading about the way the seals make their way there for oxygen. The idea of living on or under thin ice.

### **19 November 1989**

*Mosquito net*

*bowls*

*sharp knife*

*fill gas cylinder*

Dust everywhere, mosquitoes, flies, fleas. A currawong sits in the tree outside. Frogs in the dam last night, and when I went down this morning to look, there are big mottled yellow and brown tadpoles, with eyes on the corners of their bodies; dozens of them, sitting on the surface of the water.

I read that traces of DDT have been found in every living thing.

**Postscript: 30 January 2012**

It's more than a year since I've stayed at the cabin, and I have to duck under low branches and kick dead twigs off the track. When I sit on the steps in the heat of the day to eat lunch, small birds, finches and robins I think, sit a few feet away and watch. R died last year, quickly and quietly, so I was told, outside his house. There has been nobody living here since then. The land has been sold and I have to pack up the cabin. I haven't had time, or energy, to think of moving it somewhere else.

I pack the car with the last of my belongings – water containers, plates and cups, the cabin trunk where I kept clothes and bedding, a radio, books, tools, an enamel dish I used to wash in. Before I leave, I walk down to R's house. He had bought a house for removal and hollowed out a sunny spot on the side of the hill for it. The house has no outlook, only a few small windows, but he used to walk down the back steps and stand on the flat cleared ground and piss over the edge, looking down into the valley with its rocky outcrops with ferns and orchids and tall gums in the creek valley. It's a fibro cottage, built at the time when fibro still contained asbestos. Somebody, probably the new owners, has begun to demolish the house. There are panels that have been broken and pulled away from the timber frame. I turn around to walk away, and start to compose a note saying, do you know about the danger of breathing in asbestos fibres? Death is still in the air, perhaps.

I had known R for many years, but he pushed me away in the last few years, as he became more of a hermit. He was one of the most authentically eccentric people I have met, an anarchist and libertarian, iconoclast and autodidact. I feel sad that I've lost someone who influenced my life in subtle ways, who sometimes gave wise advice, often irritated me, always challenged me to examine my thoughts and actions. I've lost the cabin too. I've been reading about huts: Kamo no Chomei's *Record of the Ten-Foot-Square Hut* (1212), and Basho's *Hut of the Phantom Dwelling* (1690). Both men were hermits. Like R, they retired to live like Zen monks in the mountains: to eat, sleep, play music, and recite sutras, and in Basho's case to write poetry. Kamo no Chomei lived in a hut small enough to be moved on a cart; temporary, he says, like our presence in this world. ... *we all in the end live, do we not, in a phantom dwelling?* Basho writes.

I had read *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, and was influenced by Basho in keeping this journal; wanting to be fully present in the moment of observation, and fully aware of the interconnectedness and multiplicity of the world around me, wanting to write mostly without displaying the presence of the writer, without getting between the reader and what I wanted them to see and feel. But not without artifice. These are fragments, but composed, arranged, suggesting underlying stories.

I drive up the hill and through the gate, passing the spot where I used to stand and look out over the sandstone ridges. This time I don't look back. Later, I stop at a roadside stall and buy blueberries. They are dark and lush with a bloom like grapes. I'll take some when I visit friends the next day.

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