

## **Travel Diary 1973**

*This transcript was typed in 2008 from the original handwritten diary from 1974, a time when computers, email and mobile phones did not exist. (communication was by sending special 'airmail' letters to 'c/-post restante', and hoping the three week mail delay (if you were lucky) worked. Italics is used for subsequent text.*

### **Getting out of Australia**

This is the story of our trip. I am now writing in January in Israel, now one year since our traveling began. A light hail is blowing against the window by a strong wind and our thoughts are at home with our families and the warm summer sun.

In the last year of art school in Melbourne it became obvious to us both that the world was rapidly changing, in many ways not for the better. Soon we would be out in a world which considered the greatest attribute of man was to have, and the greatest crime was to have not. To have is to be happy, and so it is taught to children. It would be our task to teach this first rule, if they had not already learned it. But of course, they will have already.

Our subject is the arts. An unpopular subject because it does not present a student with means of gaining materially. Many of the skills are ancient and cannot compete with mechanized production. Other disciplines now have priority in the education stakes and our subject has become merely recreation.

Finally it was becoming clear to us that trying to develop that sense we are born with, i.e. to know and feel wonder for

natural things, in people whom this sense has been greatly neglected, was an impossible task. Hence “to teach” was abandoned by us both, and during the summer of 72-73 we thought seriously about our futures, whether to travel or begin a settled life of our own using the skills we had attained to support ourselves.

We decided to travel. To travel is to learn by experience, and to learn by experience is to really learn. We were young, traveling seemed easy. We discovered it was, and yet can be the most wearisome task a human can attempt.

Dad dropped us at the edge of the road north of Melbourne (*Australia*) with the packs we had made from cane and canvas (*modern lightweight backpacks were unavailable*). It was with a pained look which I felt deeply, that he wished us safe journeying. He left us standing alone with our faces pointing towards Sydney, our first major stop. (*We had \$4000 Australian to our names, credit was unknown*)

We had hardly enough time to realize our situation when a car picked us up and whisked us quickly north.

It was summer, the land was dry, the grass yellow and generally things were brown as they usually are at that time of year in Australia. I had travelled the road many times before, from Seymour the road was narrow and ill kept. It was always heavily trafficked and considered a dangerous run. (*Two way narrow with a ‘shoulder’ on the bitumen*)

An hour later we were in Wangaratta, my birthplace and it didn’t take long to find the luxury residence of the Brown’s (*related to me in a way I still misunderstand*). The Brown’s were friendly and although they had arranged to go out that night they left us to their house and any food we might

require. So we sat down in the sumptuous family room and ate a superb bean salad to the tune of the TV and air conditioner. The latter piece of electronics was much appreciated as the night was one of those stifling hot nights inland Australia is famous for. With the return of our hosts we were offered the use of their huge caravan as sleeping quarters. The heat made it impossible to sleep. We listened to the wail of the local mosquito squadron outside the screened windows threatening us with terror if we unwarily let them in. By midnight we had decided that all attempts to sleep were futile and headed out into the night to fall into the relieving waters of the family's pool. After diving and splashing for a good hour or so, and with the night breeze on our wet bodies we finally turned in.

At 9am after a brief farewell we were on our way again. With no trouble we found transport in the front of an old Holden which was heading a few miles north. This man it turned out, had once worked for the browns but now worked for himself. He was now less well off but much happier. He also, being an old Wangarattaite, knew the Harrison family and knew my mother by name. Finally after a short slow ride he let us out and turned down a narrow side road.

Our next ride I cannot remember a great deal about except in my diary I noted he was an English teacher. He took us to Gundagai. We parted with the teacher, tramped into a milk bar and bought a hamburger and milkshake each for lunch. How I'd enjoy an Australian milkshake right now. After lunch we walked out of town and lined up again on the roadside with the timeless hitching thumb.

The sun was shining and the day was warm. This time we had to wait longer for a lift which was offered by a national serviceman. He drove like a maniac and dropped us in

Liverpool. From there we took a train to Sydney town. The "People's Palace" was the only cheap place I knew of, and there we booked a room. A bad choice, the rooms were tiny and the window opened onto a brick wall, so we got no relieving breeze all night. The night was even warmer than inland, yet we did sleep, probably from sheer exhaustion. Our reason for visiting Sydney was to acquire visas to enter the countries we intended to visit. First was our British entry visas, then we visited the Indian government tourist office but managed no information. The employee, a Seik offered us a tourist information card and liquor drinking permit, not much use to us. We arrived at the Nepalese Embassy ten minutes too late and at the Indonesian Embassy they were on some kind of holiday. Finally we headed off and found a so called Dutch self-serve restaurant which was pleasantly cool and beautifully decorated.

Next day we again tried the Nepalese Embassy and this time after much trouble managed to get inside only to find that visas would take several more days. We left in disgust hoping to get visas in some other place.

We left Sydney by taking a suburban train to Karingai where we arrived at 8.30pm. Although it was still daytime we decided not to hitch on, but trek down into the chase (*A National Park*) and stay the night in a youth hostel.

According to our map the walk to the youth hostel looked simple. It wasn't. There was about 30mins of light left and although we walked quickly the darkness came on us just as we needed it most. The track dropped steeply and was rough. Our footwear comprised a pair of plastic thongs for me (cut down because they formally belonged to my dad) and Heather wore a pair of home-made leather sandals. Our feet suffered. Finally after losing the main track we

discovered to our dismay a large body of black water lying in front of us. We began to get a bit worried. We had already been forewarned by the café owner at the rail station to beware of snakes especially near the water. It was now pitch dark and we couldn't see a thing. We listened. Far away across the water came the sound of voices. We had to ask about a bridge and so with much effort clambered over the mossy roots and thick undergrowth along the shoreline always expecting to be attacked by an unseen serpent. I shouted across the water and was told that a bridge existed further to our left. At least we hadn't traveled in the wrong direction. I had been told that these waters, part of the Hawksbury, were shark infested, so swimming was definitely out. Anyway we had our packs to carry. After a time which seemed like eternity we discovered the bridge and found ourselves at a picnic spot which was quickly being vacated by picnickers. We were about to sleep there on the grass but a few cars with boats in tow were still moving around, lights blazing. There was no sign of a Youth Hostel. No-one knew of its existence. The cars had all gone and we were resigned to a bed on the grass when a set of headlights peered at us in the blackness. They were close-set and I knew it would probably be a Landrover (*The only 4wd at this time*). Maybe this was a ranger who knew the area. I asked and to our surprise said this was not Bobbin Head our destination, but he could take us there. We climbed in and after driving around a mountain road eventually came to an isolated spot with moored boats. Our driver didn't know about a Youth Hostel but assured us this was Bobbin Head. We got out, asked again, and were told to "hang on" a moment. A man came out of a boat shed and told us to hop in to a parked Mercedes. We were on our way again to goodness knows where. After climbing a mountain we came to a lonely spot where we were instructed to follow the track. We were now almost exhausted and after much time found a concrete and

glass structure locked and obviously not a Youth Hostel. We again prepared to sleep on the ground but all was concrete, a wind had sprung up. Finally we found a little sign in the dark "YH" pointing into a gap between the trees. We cautiously followed it again expecting to tread on a tiger snake but finally came to a clearing with a little white structure. Our bed! The doors were locked but not to be left outside after all this, I climbed through a window and like goldilocks, we were soon fast asleep.

We slept till 9.30 and after meeting the warden who arrived I know not when, left to walk the reverse of our nights' escapade, back to the highway. This time of course up hill. We arrived on the main road at 12.30pm, were picked up by a truck and drove till 1am by which point we were near Taree. The driver was exhausted as we were after such a long drive. We crawled out of the cabin so the driver could stretch out to sleep. We had no sleeping bags, only a piece of plastic for a ground sheet and a mohair rug. We crawled under the rear of the truck and slept soundly. During the night it rained so it was good we slept under the truck.

At 6am we were on our way again and drove non-stop until finally the truck broke down. The motor noise in the truck cabin had been unbearable throughout this ride, I remember we could not even speak to each other, even if we shouted. A bolt of some sort had broken but within an hour we were on our way. At another place we had a flat tire and finally twenty miles (26km) south of Brisbane the truck completely broke down. The lights had fused and the clutch had burned out. We spent the night at the Beenliegh scout hall, sleeping in the little outside entrance foyer. It poured. We had concrete for a mattress but we were so tired we slept soundly. We woke at 5.30 and decided to take a train to Brisbane. Compared to the trains down south these were

like cattle boxes but we had no complaints and at 10am we were at Woody Point 19miles north of Brisbane. We spent a relaxed day on the beach. The weather was warm, sunny and very pleasant while we waited for the Youth Hostel to open.

Next day, Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> February 1973 we left the Hostel and its bitchy warden who made us sleep separately (*We were married but looked very young*).

We headed for Mackay. It took us all this day to get to the main number one highway. I remember well the second ride we made this day. We were now well into the sugar, and were standing at a service station at the crest of a hill (one I remembered from an earlier visit to Queensland). The car, a new Holden station wagon roared up towards us and drove past. I remember half-consciously sighing with relief when it didn't stop. But after a minute or two it U- turned, and stopped in front of us. A guy with a surly girlfriend looked us up and down (while I did the same). With a "wanna ride?" we hesitantly accepted. With a roar we were off and knew at that moment that even with luck we had a 50% chance of survival. It turned out the car was traveling with another heading north. We were in a race to who knows where. First we stopped at a pub. No sensitive right toe here, it was flat to the boards. At 90 mph we were driving neck and neck two cars abreast on a two way road, around corners over hills, one hand on the wheel and the other around a Fosters. Heather got a seat in the front next to the girl-friend. I lay on a mattress in the back hanging on for grim death (*seat-belts did not exist*). If anything shortened my life it was that ride. After an hour and one hundred miles the car stopped. We fell out of the car and looked at each other in dumb silence.

We had been dropped in the middle of no-where, it was between four and five pm and the sun was low. We were looking at the grass and estimating its resilience when we were picked up by a regular army guy in a Triumph saloon. This ride was also very fast, the needle sat between 90 and 100mph for much of the trip but compared to the last ride we felt completely safe. During this trip we were stopped by a police officer for making too much noise when travelling through one of the small towns. We were made by the officer to make some small alteration to the bizarre exhaust system.

At about 11pm when we were both almost asleep in the luxurious seats, I blinked and there in the lights of the car on a collision course was what looked like a sheep. In a matter of seconds we had smoothly pulled to a stop and a large steer nonchalantly plodded off the road. I was thankful that had happened in this car with this driver, and not during the afternoon.

We spent the night in caravan we hired with the driver. He had taken us 700 miles!

In Townsville, a city which seemed very rough and full of drunks, we took a ferry out to Magnetic Island. There we stayed in the Youth Hostel, most of which was non-existent due to a cyclone which had passed through recently.

We had to do some rebuilding if we wished to stay so spent an hour or so putting cement bricks in piles so they could be reused.

By afternoon it was stiflingly hot and we decided to go swimming, but to our dismay the water was warmer than blood temperature and no relief at all. What's more we had

to take our swim in an enclosed shark and stinger proof fence!

From Townsville we had to head inland if we were to get to Darwin (we were only halfway there). Hitching was out because the roads were flooded. We decided to get tickets to Mt Isa on the train, Hopefully the train line would be above flood level. Unfortunately the rail was on strike! In desperation we decided to hitch.

It seemed hopeless, the road seemed virtually deserted. We kept waiting and finally got a lift with a crazy old farmer in a Holden station wagon. How we were going to navigate the water was beyond me. We got to Charters Towers but not with our farmer friend. After many miles with him we swerved, bumped and scraped to a stop. This was no puncture. We got out and blow-me-down there was one wheel missing! Due to the weight of a forty-four gallon drum of petrol we were carrying in the back all six wheel studs had sheered off. The wheel had disappeared into the scrub. Now I know why 44 gallon drums of petrol are rarely seen in station wagons.

A car stopped as they do in the bush. The driver gave a little laugh at the stupidity of the farmer and in 15mins we were off again. We left the farmer to search the scrub for his wheel and made our acquaintance with our new chauffeur. He was a chocolate salesman. Evidently the people around here did not eat chips with their beer, instead they ate chocolate. Well we had learnt something.

The ride took us halfway to Charters Towers, we were near a tiny hamlet (one house and a rail siding). The situation seemed hopeless. The road was empty due to the flooded road and the trains were on strike. While we stood

wondering out lonely fate to our surprise a train arrived! At the time we didn't know we were only 100yds from the line! Why a train arrived just then we will never know. Evidently rail communications are slow in outback Queensland. There was no-one to take tickets or a place to buy one so we just hopped in the nearest carriage. We saw not one other person and soon were spread out on the bench seats fast asleep. The old wooden train seemed to move at just faster than walking pace and by evening we had arrived at Charters Towers. We hopped out, still no ticket and found a caravan to rent for the night.

It was already Tuesday and long way from Darwin. We passed kids on their way to school as we walked out of town. There under a large shady tree we stopped to thumb and a little old man came out and offered us his roof if we couldn't get a lift. He said young travelers from all over the world had used his tree as a hitching point and now he had many friends from all over the world who sent him letters.

Our next driver took us as far as Hughenden. This was as far as it was possible to go by car, there would be no more hitching. Inland Australia was a lake. We found there was an air service. In desperation we decided to buy air tickets and had purchased them in readiness for the next flight out. That same afternoon however we found a train was leaving at 2.30am for Julia Creek, depending on the outcome of the strike. We immediately cashed our tickets and that night went to the pictures.

It was ultra-hot. Everyone arrived in riding boots and cowboy hats. The girls were in full dresses. We sat in deck chairs to watch the story of a jet-ski thief with a cave hideaway.

At midnight the train arrived, we climbed in and crashed on the long bench seats. People were few and far between. During the night the train moved out.

We awoke to find ourselves truly in the middle of no-where. From our carriage window we could see nothing but green grass stretching flat to the horizon in all directions. We ate the few crackers we had with us and spent our time talking quietly letting ourselves be pulled out into this nothingness.

At 1.30 we arrived at Julia Creek. From here the line was crossed by water and unusable. We had already observed the water and its devastating effect on the road. From the train window we had seen little groups of people standing around their bogged down vehicles in the now, huge lake.

There were other travellers who had their vehicles transported by rail and we all disembarked together. There was nothing to be done but go to the pub. We chatted over what was to be done. It was discovered that a car had just arrived from Isa via the "beef road".

Lionel and Dorothy Gamble with their Toyota Landcruiser and huge caravan offered us a ride via the round-about track and soon we were on our way (*almost via the Gulf*). The road was a long one and maddening, it covered only a short distance as the crow flies.

Half-way through the day we stopped with a flat tyre on the caravan. We all climbed out to a scene of water to the horizon all around, with straight bitumen heading north/south. There was not a sound. We stood with our mouths open then slam, we were covered with little black crawling flies! Pity being stuck out here for long.

It took nearly to midnight before we made Isa. On our arrival we were offered a bed by our drivers in their caravan and were given a full meal with shower beforehand. We owe a lot to these people.

Next day Friday 16<sup>th</sup> February saw us back on the road, but after several hours hitching determined that the situation was hopeless due to lack of traffic. At any rate the road West from Isa is very remote and drivers are not anxious to pick up strangers. We did meet a young guy who had been trying for three days to get a ride without success. So we walked back to Mt Isa town to buy bus tickets to Darwin, \$80 for two, expensive.

Mt Isa is rough especially after 5pm. I remember watching with fascination and horror a large aboriginal woman pursue her fleeing husband from hotel bar to bar with half a brick in her hand. She was quite intoxicated and certainly well versed in the art of swearing. With a loud full voice she told her non-existent audience the treatment her unfaithful lover would receive on his discovery!

The bus trip to Darwin was quite exciting. We had to cross three swollen creeks. At the worst of these we had to remove all luggage from beneath the bus and stow it inside. The luggage compartment flaps were opened and when we entered the water the swollen creek simply flowed through the bus body!

At twelve thirty we made Three-ways. Now we turned due north for Darwin. At three pm Sunday we reached Darwin. The weather was almost unbearable. We spent one night on the "beach" (*a stretch of scrub near the sea which had been obviously used by itinerants frequently*) and the next day we were ready for our flight out of Australia for the first time in

our lives. Unfortunately our flight would leave early Monday so we would miss our mail in Darwin (*at the Post Office*).

Finally the Fokker climbed out of Darwin and we watched Australia disappear. The muddy waters of the coast abruptly changed to blue. We flew with our noses constantly on the window trying to get a last glimpse of home. It was our first flight.