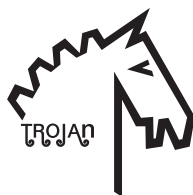


At Baldy's Feet

A Memoir

Chester Eagle



I was obsessed by Mount Baldhead. I could see it from the back of the school where I worked. If I drove out the Lindenow road, I saw it behind Mounts Taylor and Lookout. If I stood on the bluff where the Mitchell turned to enter the lakes, and ran my eye along the horizon, Baldhead was there, supreme, in my mind, lordly, full of meaning.

What meaning? I could hardly answer that question in those days, because what I felt was still forming. I'd given up believing in God some years before, but still had need of a unifying thought. I need it to this day. The mountain known as Baldhead – snowgrass on its pate, not trees, in those days – promised a vision of unity because one could see it from the lowland, and from its peak one could find the connection: the Nicholson rose at one's feet, gathered run-off from surrounding ranges, and took itself, a river now, to the lakes, and, after the lakes, the sea. This too, the ultimate destination, was visible from the peak and, as I said before, one could look back from the lowland and see where it all began.

As a young man, I found this vision to have a power I couldn't explain. It didn't answer any questions, but it resonated in my mind. The distant peak had a god's eye view, and the same view, looking back, gave me a feeling of acceptance, something that didn't come easily to a restless young man. Looking back on my struggles to make the world coherent, I can see why this backwards and forwards vision, lowland and distant mountain, was so appealing. It was, in my mind at least, a closed system containing everything, especially if I added to the vision the stories about Baldhead which friends in my town had told me.

I was always driving out to my mountain, driving around it, driving near, finding new ways of approach. I felt, though I rarely told anyone this, that I could never be lost in that country because one glance at my mountain would let me know my direction for getting home. Its profile was as familiar as that. In my tiny car I sidled along the ranges that led away from it, I stopped and explored, I walked about, and then I pressed on, adding more to the scraps that dangled, now, from the central story of my life. Not an explanation, but a view that satisfied.

The reader will have noticed that the vision I am talking about was from a peak, or, if looking back, included, and respected from afar, my chosen peak. It was personal, therefore, and full of pride. I liked my drives, and my walks, to be high. I liked to look far and wide, to have everything at my eyes' disposal, as it were. To go down, to go in, was good, but to be up, and looking wide, was better. That was how I was at that time.

Then something happened. I was driving back from Mount Baldhead one afternoon, scanning the gaps between the trees, when I thought I saw a clearing far below. I stopped the car and moved about, trying to pick up what I'd seen. Yes. There was a clearing that I'd never noticed before. I asked Sid Merlo and his brother Pud, two men, many years older than me, who'd been brought up in the area. 'Marthavale,' they told me. 'Used to be a bit of a cattle run down there, well, for a few years anyway.' I wanted to see it. 'There'd be a track,' they told me, 'but what condition it'd be in, would be hard to say. Best to have a look.'

They were bush men, and that meant caution. I, on the other hand, thought my Volkswagen could go anywhere. I'd visit this Marthavale. I kept asking questions of the Merlo brothers. They didn't know when it had been settled. They didn't think it had ever produced much, but it had been a useful place to hide stolen cattle. 'Nobody went lookin', out there.' Their brother Jack, they told me, had ridden to Marthavale for some reason, and, in trying to get home by night, had become lost. His only chance, he decided, was to give his horse a loose rein, and it brought him home. This meant crossing the Angora range, running south-east from Baldhead, and finding the

Merlos' cottage – the post office, in those parts – at the mining settlement of Brookville, on the other side of the range.

I found the track – the turn-off, as the Merlos called it – to Marthavale, and one day at the height of summer I followed it down, taking with me a girlfriend, a nurse – erotic word to men of my age – a young woman called Evelyn who liked to explore. We made our way to the bottom of the huge basin before Mount Baldhead, and found cleared ground, a wrecked gate, and the remains of a stockyard. We walked on and reached a flowing stream, one of a number that combined to form the Nicholson, we changed into our bathers, and we sat in the water. It was a hot day, the water was cold, and we talked, bodily close, conversationally entwined, for what seemed hours. Evelyn's bathers were red, and mine were black, a good combination, one might think, but there was a huge barrier to us becoming a combination, and most of it was in my mind. I didn't want to marry Evelyn, but I desired her, and this created conflict in me. She told me often enough how she felt sorry for her mother, married to a testy, grumpy man who treated his wife responsibly enough but wouldn't show her the love she deserved. It seemed to me that if I married Evelyn we would repeat this antithesis, and I didn't want to fall into that trap. Evelyn's father, whom I saw often enough, was a warning. Evelyn thought her father had to be apologised for; he was an example of the obtuseness of males who simply wouldn't take the path of love, which was, as any woman could see, the path of least resistance. Evelyn thought that women's understanding was superior to men's. Foolish men, like her father, made her laugh. This meant that I too was laughable, though she never said it. I, in her mind, was at a prior stage – to be protected – where I had to be won so that I could be taught. Men might be proud of themselves but women felt a little sorry for their state.

I think I've said enough to indicate that the two young people settled in a cool stream on a hot day were not the happy-looking couple they might have appeared to anyone coming on them unexpectedly, if such a thing was possible: any engine, or even the hooves of horses, would have been audible from far away.

Evelyn and I sat in the water. At a certain point, Evelyn touched my bathers, and I knew she felt desire for me. I certainly felt desire for her. Beside our stream there were grassy mounds and nothing would have been easier than to lead her to one of them, to drop our wet garments and join. Nothing would have been easier? But what would have followed? She wanted to marry. Marriage was a bargain, a deal, a construction built by two parties and Evelyn was certain that women were smarter. They didn't tell men everything they had in mind. They were mad to be as trusting as that. On the other hand, they guaranteed their men love and loyalty which, women knew, was necessary to sustain male egos. I hated all this. It seemed to me that if you married along those lines the two of you spent the rest of your lives in a tangle, not of your making but which you'd agreed to, and you would enter the tangle knowing you'd never find a way out.

We sat in the water, talking of this and that. Eventually we got back into our clothes, started the car and climbed out of the valley. Getting out seemed much quicker than discovering the deserted property, and much easier for us than for Jack Merlo, all those years before. It was only a matter of minutes before our overgrown track rejoined the road to Mount Baldhead, used on working days by trucks going to and from their mill. The sun was lowering as we reached the top of the range, and the great bowl before Baldhead was beginning to darken. A few minutes later I put the headlights on in case we met anything coming the other way. We didn't. We had the whole day to ourselves. What had happened between us, and what had not, was ours alone. I felt I'd faced a judgement, and hadn't fared very well.

I never went back to Marthavale, with Evelyn or anyone else. It was, for me, and I suppose it still is, a place of failure, a place where the irresistible encountered the immovable. Desire and what human beings want to turn desire into. Desire and love, selfishness and unselfishness, reach their balance in a flash. Once they've settled wherever their inner forces place them on the scale, there's nothing that can be done, except to proceed or to step back. We'd not lain on those grassy mounds, Evelyn and I, and we would only harm each other if we stayed together. She left. She got a job in another town, I saw her once or twice, then we let each other go.

Strangely enough, we met each other again, years later, and made love easily. Freely. Willingly. It's a simple thing to do but as we all know, it can be more difficult than almost anything else. Making love, the acts of sexual union, allow feelings to flow and there's no masking or disguising what those feelings are. Hatred and contempt can rush like a current between two bodies interlocked, and can do it as easily as tenderness, affection, or the most wondrous love. When you're making love you know what's going on inside the other person and they know what's happening in you. At the time I'm describing, the day of our visit to Marthavale, Evelyn and I were ambivalent about each other, which means, of course, ambivalent about ourselves. It's hard to love someone properly unless you have that level of self-acceptance which is the basis of love.

In setting down these thoughts, I'm wondering if they're valley-thoughts, or mountain thoughts: high or low? Or somewhere on a valley side, trying to get up but prone to slide back? Or is this silly thinking, trapping myself in a metaphor? It's ever so easy to do.

In the days that I'm describing, when I was driving in the vicinity of Mount Baldhead, I became aware that there was a gold mine operating at the point where Yahoo Creek joined the Nicholson. I went down to have a look, and met the miners. They made me very welcome. They said it was all right if I came back with friends who wanted to see their operation. I made a couple of visits and wrote about them warmly:

Somewhere here was the stringybark hut of Dowsett and McCully. Dowsett was a local man, a miner from way back, who knew the hills as one who had walked them. McCully was a retired engineer, a suburban man taking a wonderful new lease of life as he planned and operated the pumps and engines of a mining venture. Their hut was like a re-creation of the rotting past; beds made of bags stretched over saplings, wallaby-skin rugs, billy and camp oven dangling from hooks over grey ashes that rekindled when they threw on leaves. ... Their crushing plant, brought from Bendigo, was firmly embedded. It was good to see Mr Dowsett shovelling into the crusher while Mr McCully oiled the engine and the huge wooden flywheel painted with the name of their mine went round and round, Yahoo, Yahoo, lumbering over and over, Yahoo, Yahoo, Yahoo.

I notice myself calling the miners 'Mister'; this means I knew I was young and thought they were old. Today I'm older than either of those men: what happened to their mine and its equipment I cannot tell you.

On one of my visits to the Yahoo my Volkswagen had to nose through mist. Forest and track were dripping wet. The miners were not at their hut that morning, so I showed my companion – I think it was Evelyn, but I'm not sure – the hut, the mine shaft, the crushing plant and the vegetable garden, fenced to keep out wallabies, and then we drove out again, still through the mist. I'd heard bird calls while we were on the Yahoo, and thought they were all from the same throat – a lyrebird. Driving out, we disturbed the songster, and he dashed in front of the car for a few paces before

scrambling, half-fluttering, into the bush beside the track. I found this most exciting. The bird was very beautiful, and it had the odd effect of making me feel that I belonged in the deep, dripping valley nearly as much as it did. If I'd been one of the miners I'd have said I was completely at home. As it was, I was a visitor, but visitors had rights of belonging too. Looking back on that noisy German car and its impetuous driver, I'm not so sure, but at the time I felt a keen sense of belonging to the place. An explorer had to find his way in, after all.

I was fortunate to have the Merlo brothers among my friends because every time I made a trip into the Nicholson River country I discovered something that needed explaining, and this they could do for me, having the advantage of experience going back years before my arrival. On one of my expeditions I followed a road under construction between Mount Baldhead and the peak in front of it, Valentine's Knob, also known as Mikado Hill. To my surprise I found that the 'new' road allowed me to look at the stumps of enormous trees, with axe marks showing where the timber men of an earlier generation had cut scarves in the trees into which they'd driven planks to stand on while they chopped. In the days before chain saws axe men had needed to get much higher than was the modern practice, and the scarves cut in what were by then grey remnants spiralled up beyond the buttresses of roots holding the giants in the ground. It was a new road, but it showed that an earlier generation had been there before, perhaps at the time when the Merlos' mother was baking her family's bread in the post office which was their home.

The most sobering observation of this area came on a day when I took my friend Les Johnson into the hills. We drove out from Bruthen, along the range that leads to Mount Sugarloaf. Somewhere along the way we dropped off the range and found our way down to the Nicholson. I seem to remember that we were close to its junction with the Yahoo, but on the other side of the stream from the new mine. When the ground flattened out, near the stream, we got out and walked. It was a cool day, overcast, and the place we were exploring was deeply enclosed. We had a car to get us home but, walking among the scraps of a place once inhabited by miners, the comforting features of civilisation felt very far away. We found relics of what had once been dwellings: a rusty iron roof held up, now, by blackberries, a few sheets of bark, curling with nothing to keep them flat, and holding tiny pools of water. We saw broken bits of camp ovens, and mounds of gravel. The ground was disturbed in places where someone had flattened the earth with a shovel before erecting a tent. There were remnants of cars – an ancient battery and a couple of long-flattened tyres. It occurred to me that men must have come out to the Nicholson, mining, when the economies of the capitalist world collapsed in 1929. For years afterwards, until war broke out in 1939, societies were in turmoil. Families huddled together, trying to maintain themselves, others broke apart. Men went walkabout, as they said, borrowing an aboriginal term, looking for something to support them when they couldn't support anyone else. It was a time when individualism went sickeningly out of control. Men wandered, tramped, begged and stole. Others reached further back in their country's history and looked for gold. Gold! There was little of the 1850s excitement in the 1930s, only the desperation of trying to survive. Now that vast areas of the state are embedded in national parks and forest reserves, it's hard to remember how desperate individuals, fortune-hunters possessed by the frenzy of searching, roamed places forgotten today in search of ...

... something. When human society closed down access to the means to live, men turned to the land, hoping that it would provide, as it had – sometimes – for the fortunate of those earlier gold rush years. Men went bush, nosing about, shooting a bird, a fox or a wallaby, anything they could eat. They trapped, they put nets in streams. Few white men ever stayed long enough in one

place to grow vegetables, as Chinese miners did. At the bottom of the Nicholson valley, at Baldy's feet, they'd have been wet, cold and hungry. They'd have seen the sun for a few hours in the middle of the day. News of the outside world would have been brought in, inaccurately enough, by new desperate men, replacing those who'd moved out. Some of them, thinking themselves well set up, would have arrived in cars ...

Les and I nosed about, not unlike the miners of thirty years before. Our car, out of sight but ready to go, was a couple of hundred metres behind on the track that had brought us in. We picked up scraps, bottles, a bit of what might once have been a sardine tin. 'Eating out of tins,' Les said. 'None of these fellas knew how to live off the land. They'd have been all right if they had.' I agreed. It all looked pretty desperate. 'They told each other they were mining,' Les said. 'I bet none of them ever made a quid out of gold.' We looked at the bush around us, lovely in its way, but inducing despair if you looked to it for comfort. 'Let's go upstream,' said Les. 'See what else we can find.'

We strolled on. There was a trench of sixty to seventy metres, dug to take water from somewhere to somewhere else. We couldn't quite work out what it had been for. Then we came on two cars. They were black and had probably always been black. They were also rusty. Their wheels squashed what was left of their tyres. 'They got'em in here and they couldn't get'em out,' said Les. 'Maybe they just ran out of petrol.' He was beaming. 'Quite a way to the bowser, down here!' We went to the nearest one; I no longer remember what brand of car it was. There was a tree, a sapling, in such a strange place it took us a moment to see what had happened. The bonnet, or lid covering the engine, had been left up by whoever deserted the car, all those years ago, and it was still open. The seed of a eucalyptus tree had germinated in the soil beneath the engine, the seedling had begun to grow, had found a way to the sky between engine and bonnet, and was a man's height higher than the car it had grown through. Les laughed. He and I were an unlikely pair of friends, different in almost every aspect of outlook and education, but each of us always knew what the other was laughing about. 'Ridiculous, isn't it?', I said. I put my head over the rusty engine and looked at the ground. The tree had a good grip on the soil. I said, 'I suppose you could cut it down if you wanted to move the car, but ...'

I pointed around. Les grinned, and did me the courtesy of looking where I was pointing. There was bush, bush, only bush, as far as the eye could see, which wasn't very far. 'What happened to these fellas?' said Les. 'They disappeared, and they turned up here. Then they disappeared from here.' He looked around at the imprisoning bush. 'Once you get out here, you've hit rock bottom, I'd reckon. So where do you go if you hit rock bottom and you can't get up? Thin air?' He waved his hands. 'What do you do? Turn yourself into a tree?'

'I've no idea,' I said. 'I think we've reached the end of that road.' There was nothing to do but go home. We walked back to our car, started the engine, and began our climb.