OSBORNES IN EDEN

On reading Dr. Edgar Beate's description of the Osbornes (August Bulletin) I was reminded that Marianne North wrote: "I wish I were an Osborne."

Marianne (b. 1830) was the daughter of Frederick North, M.P. for Hastings, and grew up in a cultured and stimulating atmosphere where family friends included Edward Lear, George Bentham the botanist and Sir William Hooker. She was one of those intrepid Victorians who roamed the world recording its plant life in a series of brilliant paintings which are now housed in their own gallery at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Her diaries, which were first published in 1893 under the title "Recollections of a Happy Life," have recently been re-issued in a shortened, though fully illustrated version. as "A Vision of Eden."

The following account of her trip to Illawarra (1880) is from the earlier, fuller description. Marianne North had been staying at Camden Park and enthusing about the gardens there and the vineyard which she feared "would not be kept up when the old gentleman died." She went on:

"They lent me a buggy with a fat horse and driver for a week, and I went through pretty scenery till I reached the top of the Illawong Mountains, and went down the wonderful bit of road to Balli. At the top I saw many specimens of the great Australian lily or doryanthus, but they were not in flower. I watched a spike of one, seven feet high, off and on for two months at Camden, and it never came out (the one I afterwards painted at Kew took five months after it had begun to colour before it really came to perfection). There was a fine sea-view, and lower down the road took me through the richest vegetation, quite unlike anything else south of Brisbane. Tall seaforthia palms and cabbage or fan palms, full of flower, many of them of great height. Often one had helped itself up in the world by means of the branches of a giant gum-tree, resting its tired head against the trunk for support, quite 200 feet above the ground in the valley below.

But it was always raining in this unexpected bit of the tropics, and I had no easy task to finish a picture there. Three times I packed up my things in disgust, and at last brought home my paper wetter with rain than with oil-paint. People were all related to one another, and all hospitable, and I drove from house to house, only regretting that the horse and buggy were not my own, when I could have stayed much longer with enjoyment. Another day I stopped to paint a gigantic fig-tree standing alone, its huge buttresses covered with tangled creepers and parasites. The village was called Fig-tree village after it, and all the population was on horseback, going to the races at Wollongong. At Mr. H. O.'s I saw a grand specimen of the "red cedar." It had leaves like the ailanthus, but its wood smelt like cedar pencils, and was red as mahogany, which gave it its name. The tea-trees there were covered with tiny white bottle-brush flowers, and were rosy with their young shoots and leaves. Another sort was called the paper-bark tree Melaleuca leucadendron. One could pull lumps of soft paper from it, ear it apart, and write on it without difficulty in a blotty sort of
from it, tear it apart, and write on it without difficulty in a blotty sort of show the steps cut in them by opossum-hunting natives, who now no longer existed in those parts. The notches were probably only cut big enough to rest the great toe in, but the bark and tree had swelled as it grew older, and the holes were now large enough to hold the whole foot. Some of them had been enlarged into nests by the laughing jackass. Lots of those comical birds perched on those trees and gossiped about us, as we sat and watched them.

The garden at Doondale\(^2\) was a sight to see: pink and white Azalea indica fit for London shows, bougainvillea with three yellow blooms at once in their purple bracts, flame-trees (Sterculia), gorgeous Cape lilies, and all our home-flowers in perfection. I was offered the loan of this lovely house for a month, when they were all going to another house on the cooler side of the hills.\(^3\) It had a valley of ferns a mile off, and one could see miles of cabbage-palms below like gigantic Turk’s-head brooms, such as housemaids use to sweep away spiders with. The road along the coast to Kiama (pronounced “Kye-aye-mar”) was dreary enough, through miles of tall dead trees all ringed or burnt to death purposely by civilised man, who will repent some day when the country is all dried up, and grass refuses to grow any more.

At the lake of Illawarra\(^8\) we again found ourselves in the tropics, all tangled with unknown plants and greenery, abundant stag’s-horns, banksias, hakea, and odd things. I put up at the house of a pretty little widow, who apologised for having a party to say goodbye to some friend. They danced till morning, soon after which she was up to see me off. Before this I had wandered on the lovely sea-sands, seeing and hearing the great waves as they dashed in and out of the blowholes. Rocks and giant fig-trees grew close to its edge, and I found basalt pillars as sharply cut as any on the Giant’s Causeway itself. The road up the Kangaroo river and over the sassafras mountain is pretty.\(^9\) I tried to make out the sassafras leaves by their scent, but nearly all the leaves were much scented on that road, and it was not till some time afterwards that I made out the tree. After turning the top of the hill we came suddenly on the zamia or cycad—a most striking plant, with great cones standing straight up from the stem. When ripe the segments turn bright scarlet, and the whole cone falls to pieces, then they split open, and show seeds as large as acorns, from which a kind of arrowroot can be extracted, after washing out all the poison from it. The natives roast and eat the nut in the centre of the scarlet segments. There were no zamias outside that valley, which seemed to have no outlet.\(^10\) Like that of the Yosemite, it was discovered by a mere accident. It belonged, like the greater part of Illawarra, to the family of Osborne, who were building a large house there. It was certainly the most enticing part of Australia, and I wished I were an Osborne.

—ANNETTE MACARTHUR-ONSLOW.

(NOTES TO “OSBORNES IN EDEN”)


2—Sir William Macarthur (1800-1882), fifth son of John and Elizabeth Macarthur, was a renowned horticulturist and agriculturist. “He was regarded as being
as great a benefactor to New South Wales in the production of good wine as his father had been in the production of good wool" (Aust. Encyc.).

3—Presumably Illawarra.

4—Bulli—an error which has unfortunately found its way into the new book.

5—Probably Henry Hill Osborne’s. He was at this time the owner of “Avondale,” part of the vast domains of his father Henry Osborne, who had died in 1859.

6—Avondale? This name could be so written as to look something like “Doondale.” Miss Macarthur-Onslow comments that Marianne North “would not allow anything to be published in her lifetime, and her sister must have had an awful task editing the notes and diaries.”

7—This may refer to Barrengarry House, though Kangaroo Valley would certainly not be on the cooler side of the hills in summer.

8—This is hard to follow. The obvious route from Dapto to Kiama in those days would have been via Jamberoo, but Marianne must have taken some route which followed the lake shore and the coast.

9—This is equally hard to understand. The narrative jumps without any explanation from the basalt pillars (at Bombo or Kiama?) to the Kangaroo River and the “sassafras mountain.” She refers later to having seen “another platform or cliff with a great waterfall falling from it into the blue depths some thousand feet below, and distant view, like that at Govall’s [sic] Leap, over endless misty forests of gum-trees.” This is presumably Fitzroy Falls, in which case “Kangaroo River” would be Barrengarry Creek, and the “sassafras mountain” the ascent from Kangaroo Valley to Fitzroy Falls.

10—It has, of course; but in the last place anyone would look for it—the south-western corner, farthest from the sea, where it is practically useless for communications.