

MOUNT AGNES

My love of Kimberley began in 1955 when I was a 20-year-old cattle drover working on GoGo Station near Fitzroy Crossing. At that time I couldn't think of anywhere I would rather live than the far north of Australia. However, over the following 25 years, firstly as a sheep farmer and then as a sculptor, I hadn't given Kimberley much thought!

Then, in 1981, son Peter set off on a trip around the world before going up to Durham University. As we both happened to be in Melbourne at the same time, I decided to show him some of the *Outback*, the real Australia.

I wrote to my friends, Nickie Birks and Rick Tudor, and asked them if they would be interested in making a trip to Kimberley. Nickie agreed if he could bring his daughter, Alice. Rick replied in the same fashion asking if his brother, Chris, could join us. I agreed immediately. We started to make plans and straightaway ran into trouble as after working out the cost, Rick and Chris decided they could not afford to come. However, by then I knew that both men were an essential part of the plan as six people were needed if it was going to work, so I started to think about how the problem could be solved.

I knew that Rick was an Associate of the Melbourne Herbarium and had discovered a species of *Borya Subulata* in the Grampian Mountains of Victoria, so I suggested that he went there and asked the director if he would like someone to bring back some specimens of flora from Kimberley. Rick thought it was worth a try and went to see Dr Churchill.



Peter, Grampian 'Borya' and Rick Tudor

Churchill greeted Rick with open arms as he was looking for someone to go and find a specimen of a different species of *Borya Subulata* that a botanist named Gardner had brought back from the headwaters of the Prince Regent River, near a place called Mt Agnes. Churchill said that Rick was the perfect person to look for it as he had already discovered one *Borya* species. Much more to the point he said he would be able to cover his costs! Google Earth: Mt Agnes 15/59 S, 125/43 E. Mt Tudor 16/00 S, 125/43 E. This was the first of the many amazing coincidences that were to follow.

Borya Subulata is commonly called *Resurrection Grass* because the dead-looking brown tissue of its porcupine needle-shaped leaves turn green again after rain. The dead tissue seems to be resurrected, a process not fully understood by the botanists and almost unique amongst plants.

Before this I had no fixed plans about where we were going, having only pointed at Kimberley on the map. I had asked Ron Beaver if he had any contacts in the RAAF who could give him some aerial photographs of the area. Of course Ron did have a friend who arranged for a reconnaissance plane to do an exercise over the area for us; after all they had to test their cameras somewhere, so why not Kimberley!

Now that we had a definite target I went to Rio Tinto Zinc and asked them if they would like us to take sand samples in the creeks on the way out to Mt Agnes. They agreed to support us and gave us a small grant so Rick's brother, Chris, was now financed as well. The next step was to buy some Ordnance Survey maps. We saw that there was a track heading north from Mt Elizabeth Station to Mt Jameson that passed quite close to Mt Agnes. We decided that we would be able to walk in from Mt Jameson if the country got too rough for the jeeps. Looking back, it was all quite mad and very haphazard.

Tickets were purchased and we flew from Melbourne to Adelaide and up to Kununurra. Ninety per cent of our luggage was made up of dried food that Rick's wife, Liz, had bought and packed into survival kits so we wouldn't have to pay the high prices demanded in the Outback. On arrival in Kununurra we hired a Cessna and flew over Mt Elizabeth Station to Mt Jameson and had our first view of the very oddly shaped Mt Agnes. From the air it all looked deceptively easy and it appeared we would be able to drive right to the foot of Agnes. In reality it turned out to be very different.



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Mt Tudor and the distinctive twin peaks of Mt Agnes

In Kununurra we hired two old jeeps and set off along the Gibb River road for Mt Elizabeth Station, the vehicles groaning under the weight of fuel drums, water tanks and Liz's survival food packs. I was the only person who had ever been to Kimberley, but that was way back in 1955 and this was 1981. A lot had changed over the intervening 26 years!

The first night out from Kununurra, we camped beside a billabong full of freshwater crocodiles which, although harmless, can grow to about eight foot long. Saltwater crocodiles attack humans and can reach up to 30 foot! The way to tell the difference is by the length of their snouts as freshwater crocodiles have long pointed ones and salties don't. How one was meant to distinguish this in the dark was anybody's guess! I knew freshwater crocodiles had very sharp teeth from my police patrol days when our black trackers had cooked one for our dinner.



Taking sand samples from a beautiful lagoon

The road was tough, being either bare rock or a foot-deep powder called *bull dust*. The dust was awful because as the vehicles ploughed through it great plumes rose behind us like smoke from a steam train. The open cabins sucked in the swirling muck and very soon we all looked like Aborigines.

After two days of driving we arrived at Peter Lacey's Mt Elizabeth homestead. Peter and his wife greeted us as long-lost friends, and gave us tea and permission to head out into the Bush through their property.

That night we camped on the Hann River. On arrival we stripped off and bathed in the sweet waters of a rock pool. Never has a bath been more welcome. The sun had set and the sky was pitch black and studded with stars. I had brought a little tape recorder so we lay on the hot rock, the camp embers glowing, the river murmuring, and listened to Mozart's Flute and Harp concerto, while we looked out beyond our own Milky Way to the Greater and Lesser Magellanic Clouds. What Magic! This is what the Bush is all about. It was a truly amazing feeling to be back in Kimberley and camping under the stars again. The heat and smell of the bush are all so evocative it made me feel

20 again instead of 46. I lay there thinking of all the things that had happened to me over the intervening years. Sheep farmer, husband, father of three sons, sculptor and now a member of a team of explorers in search of a lost plant!

I awoke at the first hint of dawn and crawled out of my blanket to collect some spinifex grass for the fire. The ash was still warm and I laughed when I remembered our fright during the night. We were dozing off when a rifle shot had rung out, then another. Concerned queries came from a ring of alarmed bundles until we realised the noise was caused by the hot rock under the hearth exploding as it cooled.

The fire was soon going as waxy spinifex grass makes great kindling. Fire was one of the things that we had to be very careful about. The country was tinder dry and one flying spark from the campfire could turn the place into an inferno. We would also have to be careful not to let grass collect around the jeep exhaust pipes as it could easily catch fire. Being caught in a bush fire was the last thing we wanted. Fire is certainly more dangerous than snakes, scorpions, spiders, or even man-eating crocodiles. Mechanical breakdown was another major concern, which is why we had two vehicles.

By the time the billy was boiling, the dawn light had turned our world a ghostly grey colour and the parrots were in full throat, raucous, totally unlike the soft sound of England's birds that I was now used to. The blankets began to stir and sleepy faces yawned, arms stretched and then bodies started to stumble around. It was just like the old days when I was a cattle drover and it brought back many happy memories. What wonderful days those had been! I was back in this magical country and I felt very happy and at home.

Breakfast was a bowl of bran mixed with warm orange juice washed down with a cup of billy tea. As soon as the swags were rolled and loaded we headed across the Hann River. In the Wet this river runs half a mile wide full of Monsoon rain. Now it was a tiny trickle squeezing through a crack out in the middle of a rock barrier surrounded by deep pools. We had walked the barrier on arrival and decided to leave the crossing to the following day when we would have plenty of light and hours to play with if anything went wrong, like a truck tipping on its side! It was not likely, for we would be travelling at one mile per hour, but it is always better to be safe than sorry in the bush. Going for help now would mean a five-hour walk, but soon, the further we got into no-man's country, it would become a several days' walk!

We eased the two trucks across the rocks in low four-wheel drive, men walking ahead in the places where we had to cross pools of water to make sure there were no hidden holes covered by weed. The light jeep went first, and when it reached the far side of the river, the fuel truck followed. We crossed the river in under an hour and set off along the track again.

With our first major obstacle cleared I felt that we were really on our way to Mt Agnes. The track wandered through the bush heading north. We knew from our Ordnance Survey map, and from what Peter Lacey had told us, that most of the way to Mt Jameson was quite good going. He often used the track himself to get out to Wren Gorge where he had a mustering camp, although it didn't look to me that there was much to muster, as we had seen very few cattle over the last two days.

He had warned us that there was one bad spot where the track went down an escarpment, locally known as a Jump Up. He said he had bulldozed most of the boulders off the track so we should be all right going down, but could have some trouble getting up! We made good progress through the

morning and around midday arrived at an isolated sandstone outcrop of rock as big as a house sitting in the middle of the plain not far off the track.

The strata were horizontal so the erosion that had left this giant standing there must have been wind, water and heat. The thought of the millions and millions of years that this must have taken made one feel very small and insignificant. The south wall of the rock afforded some shade so we drove the trucks into this haven, climbed out and stretched. We had done well and covered a lot of ground. If things went on like this we should reach Mt Agnes the following day.



▲ *a person*

Isolated rocks as big as houses

We explored around the base of the rock and got a nasty shock. The rock shelter was an Aboriginal Dream site and the walls were painted, but to our surprised, with a frog and snake using white and red house paint! I found out years later that this had been done by Aborigine school children, as part of a 'Back to the Bush' culture project!



Aborigine school children's paintings

We came back round the rock to the trucks with one wish, to leave as quickly as possible, but the Fates decreed otherwise! The fuel truck had a flat tyre. Stupidly we had driven straight off the track across to the rock without having a couple of people walk ahead to check the ground. One of the things you have to be very careful about in the bush are burnt sticks. When a fire goes through it burns shrubs to the ground, or more correctly, nearly to the ground, leaving fire-hardened spikes sticking up like nails, waiting to pierce a passing tyre. We were lucky not to have eight flat tyres! We changed the tyre and carefully crawled back onto the track and headed off. We now only had one spare tyre for the fuel truck. A costly lesson learnt that could have brought an early end to our trip.

We reached the bulldozed Jump Up and walked down the 200 yards of rubble-covered track, shaking our heads all the way. How would we ever get up again? Taking the bit between our teeth we set off; the jeep first, followed by the truck, both with a driver on his own, the rest of us walked beside the trucks, removing rocks or filling in holes to ease the wheels over the football-sized boulders. We arrived at the bottom in one piece, full of praise for ourselves! Actually the trip up on our return was a breeze, because by then we had learnt how to handle the trucks, and had used up a lot of fuel.

Someone broke out some biscuits and jam and we had lunch. It was too dangerous to light a fire, besides being too hot, so we settled for green Staminade. This salt drink is not the best taste in the world, but it keeps one fit by replacing the body salts lost in the heat. You kid yourself that the taste gets better as the days go by, but it really doesn't.

At the foot of the Jump Up the country was quite different. The gum trees were bigger, the soil was black and we started to see more stock, both cattle and kangaroos. Peter Lacey had set fire to large areas of grass here so there was a lush green picking of new shoots. However, the road got rougher as the black soil was potholed, dry and cracked and slowed our progress.

We bumped along crossing several dry creeks. Every time we hit a creek bed Rick and Peter would take a sand sample for RTZ. This suited everyone as it gave us all a chance to get out and stretch our legs. Riding in the jeep over this country was like being on the back of a mechanical bull.

The shadows were growing longer and the temperature inside the trucks had fallen a little. Now that the sun had lost its sting a couple of us climbed on the tray of the truck to leave more room inside. The gum trunks here were bone white, silky smooth and some were lemon scented, so the breeze of our passage through the hot air was almost exotic. Suddenly the walls of Mt Jameson were right beside us, which gave us a fix on the map. We followed along the foot of the escarpment to where it ended, sticking out into a vast plain like the prow of an ocean liner. The track continued on due west heading towards Wren Gorge, Lacey's muster camp, but this is where we had to leave it, swing north and then east, towards Agnes. We pulled the trucks up in the shade to discuss the situation.

What to do, as it would be dark in an hour? Once the sun sets in this part of the world, it turns pitch dark if there is no moon. No twilight would help us so we should find a campsite soon. The map was not encouraging, but it did show a creek some half a mile off to the left across the plain. It was bound to be dry, all the creeks we had crossed up to then had been, but we would at least find wood for a fire to cook our tea and boil a billy.

From here on there was no track to follow so I climbed onto the roof of the truck and, with the aid of a stick, started to point out to the driver the way through the dense grass travelling at walking pace. The cabin roof soon caved in making a comfortable seat with my feet rested on the bonnet!

We started across the black soil plain, which in the Wet would turn to a sticky black bog that animals would avoid like the plague because they would sink to their bellies if they wandered out into it. Now it was bone dry and a maze of potholes four or five feet deep. If we ended up in one of these there would be no way that we would be able to get the truck out again, so we needed to be very cautious.

It took half an hour to make it across the plain to the line of trees that marked the course of the creek. Either side of the watercourse there was a bare strip of land caused by the creek flooding in the Wet and depositing sand along the banks, making a good campsite. We pulled up after a good day's work, tired but happy.

Surprisingly the creek had pools of stagnant brown water in it, which would be all right for drinking when boiled and hopefully the tea would kill any strange flavour. We were glad to find it as we were keen to save as much water as possible, having no idea when or where we would be able to replenish our supplies. If this creek was anything to go by, our stay at Mt Agnes was not going to include washing bodies as we would need to save our water and each drink at least five litres a day just to stay alive.

Peter was sent down the bank to fill the billy. Curses followed his disappearance over the edge as he had stumbled straight into a nest of green ants! He came up out of the creek yelling a battle-cry like a soldier attacking from the trenches. The poor boy was covered with biting ants. Off came the shirt and trousers, and we brushed the emerald bodies off him.

Green ants build their nests in the trees by stitching together a dozen leaves at the end of a branch. The resulting bundle is about the size of a grapefruit and home to hundreds of ants. The nest is almost impossible to see as the rest of the foliage hides it, but with experience you get to recognise which trees have ants in them, because they are usually in colonies consisting of between 50 to 100 nests. The trees used by the ants are low to the ground so it is easy to brush against them when walking past. The good thing is that the bites don't have any reaction to the skin as no bumps erupt and no itching follows, but the feeling of the ants crawling all over you and the bites themselves, are enough to make anyone panic. The abdomen of the ant is bright green and very refreshing to taste if you grab it by the head and thorax and squeeze the juice onto the tip of your tongue.

Right now none of us knew that the bites were harmless so we could not reassure poor old Peter, who by this time was naked. We examined the nest, marked the offending tree and found a new track down to the water. A fire was soon going and the billy boiling for a well-earned cup of tea.

The light was fading fast and mosquitoes started to hum about our heads. What with ants and mosquitoes this was obviously not a great campsite. Fond memories of the Hann River camp came back to haunt us.

I had brought six sleeping nets for us because of the flies in the middle of the day at siesta time. I had learnt about midday siestas in my droving days when the cattle refused to walk in the noon heat. The problem then had been the flies as hundreds would settle on your back, swarm around your face and crawl into your eyes. Australians have developed an arm action called the

Ozzie Salute, which is a constant flicking of the hand up to the eyes to shoo the blighters away. When droving we used to role out our swag and, with the aid of a couple of sticks and the swag straps, rig a support over our heads for the nets. I got very good at doing this in the end although to begin with, just as I was dozing off, down the whole thing would come, trapping me in folds of netting, much to the Aborigine's amusement.

I had thought about this when planning the trip and had come up with the idea of parking the two trucks parallel to each other, about 40-foot apart, then stretching a towing rope between the bonnets, and another between the tailgates. From these two parallel lines we could hang our six nets like rungs on a ladder. We set about doing this and soon had a neat row of mosquito-proof nets ready for the night. A smoky fire banked with green leaves also helped keep the blighters at bay. We dined off rice, spam and biscuits, standing around in the smoke, while discussing the day's progress. From here on in we were on our own. No more tracks and no idea of where the Resurrection Grass would be hiding. However, we knew exactly where Agnes was, because we had seen her from the Cessna, and if we travelled up this valley and turned left, we should find it. It all sounded very simple!

We had learnt a couple of things. The creek that we were beside flowed west and the map showed Mt Agnes' runoff was to the east, so a watershed lay ahead of us at the end of the black soil plain. Would there be a Jump Up there? We also knew that we could not cross this creek, the sides being a sheer eight foot deep. It looked like we would have to retrace our steps, which would be easy because we had left some good tyre tracks through the long grass that afternoon, then try and work our way along the foot of the north face of Mt Jameson, above the flats and below any washouts caused by runoff from the cliffs. We crawled in under our nets and stretched out, naked in the hot night air, clothes stuffed into a bag for a pillow, and listened to the mosquitoes. We knew also to look for campsites away from stagnant water!

As the last dregs of conversation died away the sound of the mosquitoes got louder and louder. There must have been billions of them trying to eat us alive. How we blessed the nets! An added advantage to the nets is that passing snakes could not get in to snuggle up in your blanket, and spiders couldn't climb over your face as you slept. If you camp near water you can sometimes see snake tracks in the dust around your swag next morning. Snakes are not a problem in the Bush, as they hate us as much as we hate them. The trick is to make as much noise as you can when walking as the vibrations from a heavy footfall warn the snake of your coming, so if you do see one it is usually making a very fast retreat. Never try to kill it with a stick. If you miss the first time you will just make it really mad and it could turn and strike. If that happens you are then in trouble as they can move faster than you can run! Leave them alone. Of course the real experts can pick them up by the tail and crack their head off as though they are using a stock whip!

Those who have to get up in the middle of the night discover the one disadvantage of a mosquito net. Getting out of the net, pulling on your boots and stumbling around with a torch, is not much fun. Be advised, for all those concerned, take an empty Nescafé jar to bed with a good fitting screw lid!

Trapdoor spiders are deadly and the old-timers say that if you are bitten you have time to roll a cigarette, but not to smoke it. Spiders also don't like the vibrations made by humans, but they can jump! Nickie Birks wanted to catch a

trapdoor and later on in the trip we did have a spider hunt. You can only do this at night, as during the day they retreat several inches below the surface down their tunnels. The first thing you have to do is find the trapdoor that is usually tucked away in between clumps of grass. They show up white in torchlight and are about the size of a thumbnail, spun out of web silk. Having found one you can be pretty sure that a spider is waiting to pounce on passing prey from under the lid. The spider's body is big, some have two-inch long legs, so it is a mean-looking critter.

The plan Nickie proposed went as follows: 1. A man stands behind with the spade poised about six inches back from the hinge of the trapdoor, the idea being that when the spider jumps out he would quickly shove the spade into the ground, thereby cutting off the spider's retreat back down its tunnel; 2. The catcher has a jam jar ready to pop over the spider when it jumps out. He will have a split-second warning when he sees the lid move slightly before the spider jumps; 3. In front of the hole there is a third man with a foot-long twig with which he makes a faint scratching noise an inch from the lid, pretending to be the prey; 4. A torch holder keeps a steady spotlight on the whole scene pretending to be the full moon!

Of course you can guess what happened the night we were all dragooned into giving Nickie a hand to capture his spider. The torch holder got such a fright when the spider jumped that he dropped it, leaving us all standing in a circle in the dark, an angry spider at our feet and, because his tunnel had been cut, he had nowhere to go except up one of our trouser legs!

Nickie was in an even worse position as he had pounced, but didn't have a clue if he had succeeded in trapping the beast in the jam jar. Had he caught the spider or was it climbing up his sleeve? Panic! The torch holder pulled himself together, a barrage of curses having stiffened his spine. We all gazed down at the pool of light and there in the jar was one very large angry spider.

Scorpions can be a problem, so it is wise to stretch your socks over the mouths of your boots, to stop anything crawling into them, especially if you leave them outside the net through the night!

Although we were lying naked and sweating at seven in the evening, by two in the morning we were all freezing. The temperature drops very quickly when you're camping on sand. Being bald I always carry a balaclava as it keeps your head very snug on a cold night and, besides, you can't hear the mosquitoes quite so clearly. It is often better to camp on rock if you can find a flat spot, as the rock stays warm right throughout the night. You soon get used to sleeping on your stomach or your back, sleeping on your side being impossible.

At first light we were up and set off to follow our tracks back across the plain. We reached the other side in a quarter of the time we had taken the previous evening. We turned east when we hit the sandy soil that ran along the base of the Mt Jameson escarpment, hoping we would be able to squeeze through between the rocks and the black soil.

I sat up on the roof again with my stick and guided the lead driver away from the odd rock, pothole and burnt stick that could give us a puncture. We made great progress for about two hours, even crossing a couple of dry creeks with no trouble. We were coming to the watershed at the end of the valley although the rocks on our right were slowly forcing us towards the line of trees that marked the same creek we had camped beside that night. As we neared the

trees the rock wall got higher, and suddenly we had nowhere to go. We pulled up for a Staminade lunch and had a 'think'.

Obviously we had to go back and see if we could find somewhere that would allow us to climb up onto the top of the rock shelf that we were stuck beneath. The shelf had got steeper as we neared the creek, so perhaps if we followed the rock wall closely on the way back we would get lucky and find a break nearer the escarpment, and this is what happened. The rock shelf changed from a cliff into a series of foot-high steps, angled at about 33 degrees. By collecting flat rocks and stacking them against the sides of the steps we were able to make a couple of ramps up which the trucks could crawl. We made a cairn at the top to mark the spot for our return.

We found ourselves on a flat shelf of rock that ran along the foot of the escarpment and below us we could see the watershed between the east and west runoffs. The trees along the side of the creek ended and above them was an isolated island plateau. We knew that around the east side of this was the valley that led to Agnes. Before we left at the end of the week we had named the large island of rock Mt Tudor after Rick.

We drove along the shelf for about 500 yards until it squeezed into a point. Below us was a grassy plain, good driving, and we could see Agnes. Jubilation! We were in sight of our destination. Agnes is a very odd-looking heap of rocks and to call it a *mountain* is a little misleading. The base is a sheer 40-foot high wall, on top of which sit two rock cakes. Once seen never forgotten. It sits in the centre of the Prince Regent watershed as water runs to all points of the compass from its flanks.

The problem now was how to get off the shelf on top of which we were perched. We split up and started to look around. After about half an hour we chose the only possible route and started to clear the boulders off what we hoped would turn out to be a way down. But what about getting up again? We scrambled up and down the 45-degree slope several times, questioning the wisdom of making the descent.



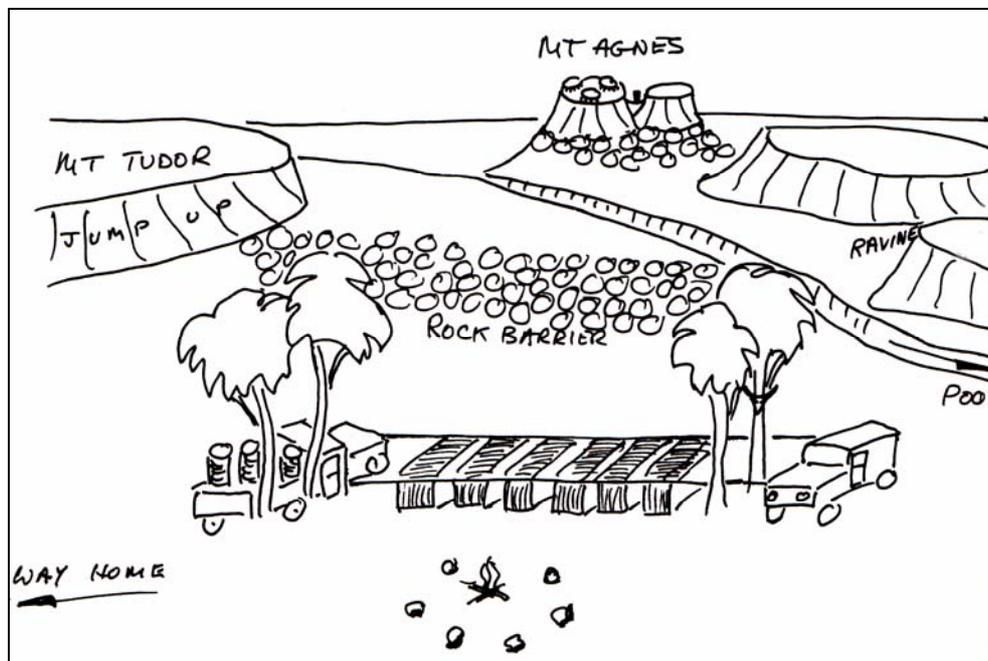
The twin peaks of Mt Agnes

In the end we decided to give it a go. Agnes was beckoning us and we were so close there was really no other choice. Staying on top where we were would have meant camping with no shade, no fire wood and no chance of water. Furthermore, it would add a good hour to our walk if we wanted to climb Agnes. We could see that once down we would be able to halve the distance. If the worst came to the worst, we knew that we could get the jeep back up the slope, and then with its help and ropes hopefully pull the truck up. With the decision made we eased the jeep over the edge in very low gear and, using the engine as a break, started down the slope. All went well and the truck soon followed.

When we were down we looked back up the track and wondered if we had done the right thing. However, it was too late to worry about it so we climbed on board and took off across the sandy flat, Mt Tudor to our left, Mt Jameson to our right, with Agnes in the middle. The country we were now crossing was again completely different. Not much grass, the occasional clump of trees, but dotted about with enormous rocks big enough to stop a tank.

We started to have to thread our way between the rocks as they got thicker and thicker, until there was just nowhere to go. We had come up against a massive barrier of rocks. As we were tired and we had just passed a clump of shady trees we decided to make them our base camp.

It was getting late, perhaps a couple of hours or so before dark. Some of us set up the nets between the trucks, while others collected firewood. Rick and Chris went forward to explore a gulley we could see in front of us running away to the east. Perhaps there was a creek hidden in the trees and just maybe there would be some water, although the chances were practically zero that we could be so lucky.



Mt Agnes Base Camp

By the time Rick and Chris returned, a good fire was boiling a couple of billies for tea and food. Tonight we were going to celebrate with beans! Rick

had a big grin on his face. Water, fresh and clear, a whole swimming pool full of it, and being topped up with a clean trickle perfect for filling water bottles! This called for a real celebration, so I broke out the cigars and wished we had brought some brandy! It was too late to go and have a look at the water ourselves, as they said that the pool was a good half-hour climb down at the bottom of a very steep ravine; besides, the track was well protected by green ants! The anticipation of seeing it next afternoon, after a long walk, and having a bath, was joy enough. There was no need for the nets tonight as not a single mosquito came near us, although we had them up for snakes. The dead wood we found around the camp gave off was incredibly fragrant like sandalwood when it burnt and the brilliant stars mixed with more Mozart topped off an evening to remember.

We were up at dawn, after a great sleep, and made ready for our first long walk in search of the Resurrection Grass. Gardner had recorded in his diary that he had found the Borya in a rocky place at the foot of Mt Agnes. This made sense to Rick as when he had found the other specimen in the Grampian Mountains it had been in damp shady conditions, growing between rocks. It was amazing to think that this primitive grass must have once covered the Continent, maybe the world, as at least two species have also been discovered in Africa.

We left the camp by seven o'clock, the air almost chilly, so we walked fast to keep warm. *Make the most of it*, I thought to myself, because it was going to be stinking hot in a couple of hours. We each carried a gallon of water, enough to last the whole day. By the time we got home we would be very thirsty, but thoughts of the pool were bliss. I couldn't wait to see it.

We climbed up over the rocks that had stopped us in our tracks the afternoon before. The barrier was even more formidable than it had looked then as it was as though a two-foot thick stratum of sandstone had been broken up with a jack hammer right across the valley. You had to step from rock to rock. The cracks between the rocks were never less than a foot wide and sometimes three foot, so we must have looked like a bunch of kangaroos leaping about. The cracks were full of spinifex grass so heaven only knew how many snakes were crawling around in the shade down there! Our main concern was to avoid a broken leg. It certainly concentrated the mind. If you broke a leg out here, being shot would be preferable to making the journey home.

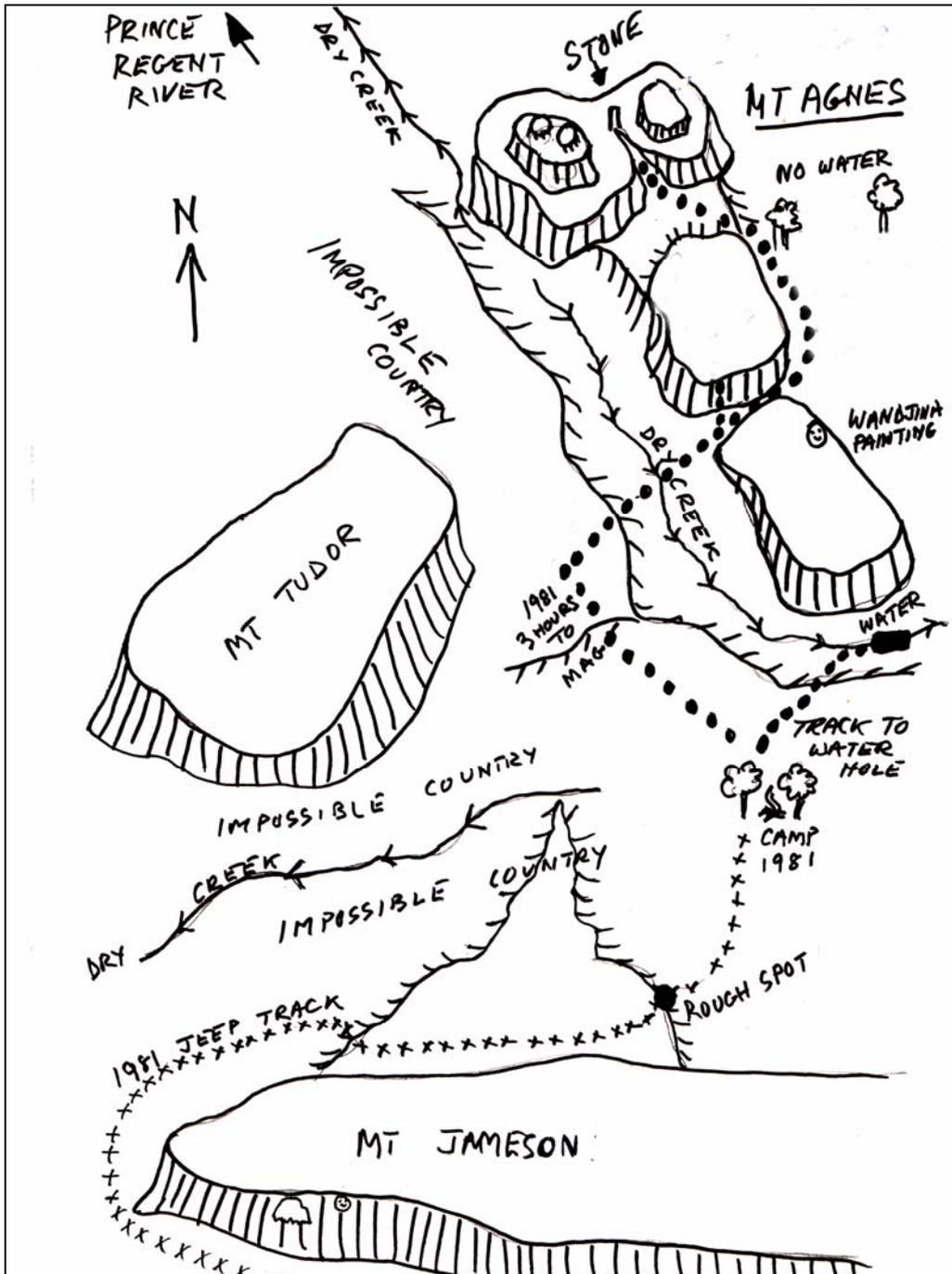
We were stopped dead in our tracks by arriving at the edge of a 40-foot precipice that dropped down into a grass-filled valley between us and the next cliff. With a lot of effort we found a way down, having turned from kangaroos into monkeys. The spear grass on the flat floor of the valley reached well over our heads so we were now walking blind in a dense golden jungle.

We set off threading our way through the golden grass passing the odd beautiful bright green tree fern. Bee-eaters flashed about, their bright emerald and bronze feathers sparkling in the sunlight. In the middle of the little valley we came to a six-foot wide and deep trench. This was the bed of the creek that must feed the Tudors' waterhole because it ran south, away from Agnes. We were right in the centre of the whole runoff system of the Prince Regent catchment area, as yesterday's creek had flowed west.

We followed the creek upstream hoping to find a crossing, which we did in the form of a huge tree trunk. We used this bridge and pushed on to the far side of the valley where we stopped for a drink of water and a 'think'. Ahead of us we could see a ravine going up the escarpment, but the rock face to the left

could be a promising area for Borya and would lead round to Agnes. It was suggested that we should split up so we could cover more country. We had seen nothing that looked like the photograph that Rick had showed us of the Resurrection Grass. Borya was obviously not abundant and going to be difficult to find!

We decided to split into two lots of three to broaden the search, although I was apprehensive about doing this. We were miles from anywhere and getting lost in this country is not the wisest of things to do. The others didn't agree with me, so perhaps I was being overcautious. Besides if we set a time to be back in camp, hopefully all would be well.



Mud map of our track in to Camp, 1981

Rick and his brother took Peter to the left along the face of the escarpment, while Nickie, Alice and I headed up the ravine. When we got to the top of it we found ourselves on another flat sandy stretch of country.

Nickie had seen an eagle floating across the peak to the right and wanted to investigate. I decided to continue on my own around to the left towards Agnes and meet up with Rick and his party. In this way I would be able to let them know where Nickie had gone as he said that he and Alice would circle round the peak to the south and then head back towards the camp by the way we had come. Now we were in three groups, two of which had no idea where the others were, making me even more apprehensive. On top of that no one knew where I was if I broke a leg or got bitten by a snake!

Before setting off toward Agnes I decided I would explore along the foot of the rock wall to the right for a little way. It was still only nine o'clock and it wasn't too hot yet. I set off along the ledge and I had not gone far when I stopped dead in my tracks. There, in a rock shelter, I saw some Wandjina paintings. One of the paintings just made me burst out laughing. These sites are a bit like open bus shelters, an indent in the rock face with an overhang. The golden reddish sandstone wall had been painted with white ochre as a backdrop for the foot-wide balloon heads that were outlined in a dark red ochre. One had an amazingly quizzical face.



Old Quizzical

Old Quizzical's round eyes looked at me with as much surprise as I was looking at him. He had inch-long eyelashes and a crew cut. I am sure I had exactly the same expression on my face as he had. I took a photograph of him and months later I had it blown up to life-size and mounted it next to my shaving mirror so we could talk to each other every morning. He still makes me laugh every time I look at him.

I dragged myself away and, feeling full of the joys of Kimberley, set off to look for Rick, Chris and Peter. I followed the cliff edge around to the north, heading towards Agnes, looking for more paintings as I went, as well as keeping an eye out for Borya. After about 30 minutes I came to the end of the cliff. The hill turned sharply to the west, but instead of a cliff the sloping face was now covered in a jumble of rocks and grass that ran out into a saddle of land reaching from the end of this hill, across a slope covered in thick grass dotted about with large rocks, to the scree at the base of Agnes.

I put my hands around my mouth and called out, "Peter!" Much to my surprise I got a reply from right above me! The three of them were sitting half way up the hill watching me. They clambered down and I asked them if they had had any luck. Nothing and they were tired of being goats. They had never seen such rough country, so obviously I had chosen the easy way!

The temperature was rising quickly, so we decided to head for home taking my easier route, and besides I promised them a treat. I led the way back to the rock shelter and the paintings. Old Quizzical greeted me again and we all had a good laugh together. When everyone had finished examining the paintings, I showed them the way back down the gully to where we had split up two hours before. We headed straight across the tree bridge and up the far cliff face, reaching camp within the hour.

Nickie and Alice had arrived back just before us and were lying under the nets out of reach of flies. We followed their example, pulled off our boots and collapsed. Nobody had seen anything that looked like Resurrection Grass, however, we had discovered a lot about the area and now knew how long it took to walk from our base camp to Agnes. We decided that on the following day we would tackle Agnes, hopefully climb her if we could find a way up and look for the Grass along the base of her southern wall.



Mt Agnes

When I had met up with Rick we had been able to study Agnes through my binoculars. It certainly was a strange-looking place, a bit like two big round cakes sitting on top of a hill. The sides of Agnes were sheer, but in the middle it looked as though there was a fault in the rock face up which we could scaled and come out between the top peaks and be able to climb up to the bigger of the two cakes.

We planned to leave earlier next morning, cover the country we had searched already before the sun rose too high, and reach the top by nine o'clock. If we did this we would be back in camp by midday. It was time for more biscuits and jam, plus a lot of Staminade, which made us all very drowsy, so one by one, we dropped off to sleep. After a very refreshing siesta we gathered up all the empty water containers and headed for the Tudors' swimming pool, full of expectations. We were not disappointed. It was everything that Rick and Chris had said it was, an oasis.

We filled the containers and some buckets for washing clothes in, and then, having feasted our eyes on the luxurious site, sank into the cool depths of the pool. It was sheer bliss. I have never felt anything as heavenly. The rocks and vegetation made the surround into a perfect natural garden and was incredibly beautiful. I have since found out that *Paradise* is the Persian word for garden, and this was *Paradise*. Calm, cool, and untouched by man.



JR and Peter cooling off in the Tudors' swimming pool

After a good soak we washed our bodies and clothes at the overflow end of the pool so it would not contaminate the pool, emptying buckets of water over each other to get the soap off. It was a heavenly hour, but the light was fading fast and if we wanted to get back to camp before dark we had to leave straightaway. The climb back up the ravine was difficult and hard work with the weight of the water so by the time we had reached camp we were as hot and sweaty as when we had set out, but it didn't matter. After a good meal of rice and tuna, washed down by yet more Staminade, we climbed under the nets and collapsed onto our swags. What a day!

The alarm went off at four and we were away at first light. The valley was still dark as we dropped down the cliff face and made our way over the bridge and up the ravine towards the paintings. Nickie and Alice had not seen them, so we took a ten-minute break to show them Old Quizzical, who greeted us with the same surprised look on his face. "What you here again!"

We then headed for the foot of Agnes, traversed up the slope of grass and rocks towards the middle where hopefully we would find a way up the wall. It proved to be much steeper than it had looked through my binoculars and as the grass covered the rocks, finding a path was very awkward. We needed a rest by the time we had reached the foot of the wall that protected Agnes' summit. We followed the cliff round and found a crack that went straight up, a veritable *Jacob's Ladder*, and since there seemed to be plenty of footholds, we started to climb.

The fissure was about 50 foot high. The only problem was that those in front continually sent down showers of stones on those following, which caused quite a bit of cursing from below! As we reached the saddle between the twin peaks, the climb eased off. In the saddle there waited another surprise. Standing some four feet tall was a pillar of stone, supported by a mound of loose rocks. I had seen quite a few Aborigine rock heaps in my mustering days, but I had never seen anything like this.



Mt Agnes monolith

The pillar looked almost as though it had been hand tooled. I guess this was impossible, but it certainly gave that impression. The rock was sandstone, although it looked different to the rock lying around the site, but surely it would have been impossible for men to bring it up from below.

We moved on to our left and continued up the side of the bigger of the peaks on the west side of Agnes. The going was easy compared to the climb up the crack, more of a stiff pinch. We quickly reached the top, where we found

three more cakes of rock. We climbed up the biggest and found a man-made cairn of stones! We congratulated ourselves, but were obviously not the first people to reach the summit!



Peter and JR on top of Mt Agnes

Lifting off the top stone we found a black plastic 35 mm film container with a note inside that recorded a visit several years before by the Victoria State Walking Club! The note went on to say that they had walked from Kalumbaroo and were on their way to Derby. I estimate that the journey would be at least 1,000 miles, and all I could think of was thank goodness it wasn't me. What a trip! It made our effort seem a bit wimpish, but on second thoughts, at least we were on a scientific quest to find Resurrection Grass, a mission of great importance, and not a walking holiday!

The reminder of our mission made us get on with taking pictures before starting back down the mountain. I turned around to have one last look and pleaded with the gods to let me come back one day. What would I give to sleep up here one night, naked under a Full Moon!

Halfway down to the Standing Stone we came across a huge trunk of a long dead pine tree lying across the slope. It was enormous when compared to anything that I had seen so far on the trip out from Mt Elizabeth Station. We had passed a few small pines and pine forests are marked on the map to the north, but this giant showed how different the climate must have once been. The girth was at least five feet round! Now there was not enough soil on the top of Agnes to make a mud pie. The dead wood of the trunk was like iron. I wondered about the amazing climatic changes that had taken place over the last tens of thousands of years. How I would love to explore the top of Agnes, and wondered what other surprises she had in store.

We clambered down the crack, skidded down the slope and headed back to camp. When we reached the top of the last cliff we spread out into a line abreast and started searching for the grass again, but found nothing.

Down at the pool that evening we discussed what we should do. Finding the grass was proving to be more than a bit of a problem. Swimming in the cool water raised our spirits and a bold plan was made. We would circumnavigate Agnes. Perhaps Gardner had seen the Grass on the north side. It would mean a marathon walk, but everyone agreed that it was worth the effort as it would be a great triumph if we were able to bring a sample back for the Herbarium. Plan made, we headed back to camp loaded up with water.

What would we have done if we had not found this pool? We had drunk gallons of water, much more than any of us had estimated we would need. The supplies we had brought in on the truck would only have lasted for two days.

Again the alarm clock went off at four, but this time no one moved. We had slept the sleep of the dead after our walk the previous day and could all do with another hour. The Grass could wait, we had all day and the chances of finding it had fallen to zero in our minds. We had tried and another hour in bed was not going to make any difference!

An hour later we all felt guilty about our slothful behaviour. A rather shame-faced sleepy band formed up behind our botanist leader, Rick, and we marched out of camp, determined to give the day our best, even if we were in for a ten-hour hike. If the Victorian Walking Club could do it, so could we!

In about ten minutes we arrived at the first rock barrier and started to imitate kangaroos again. Rick led the Indian File out onto a little salt pan, and stopped dead in his tracks, which meant that we all piled into the back of each other. There, at his feet, was a patch of Resurrection Grass, which, at a stretch, would have covered half a ping-pong table. We had literally stumbled upon it ten minutes away from our camp. It was a miracle!



*'Resurrection Grass', actual size
Discovered between Mt Tudor and Mt Agnes in 1981*

Resurrection Grass looks like a shaving brush. It was growing in clumps about the size of a dinner plate in the middle of a tiny salt pan and was not an impressive sight! Was this what Gardner had seen? Where were the shady moist rocks? We were standing in a desiccated area the size of a tennis court!



The tiny patch of 'Borya' below 'Mt Tudor'

Rick had expected it to look like the species that he had discovered in the Grampians growing in a southern climate. When Gardner had seen it maybe the salt pan was full of rainwater. It didn't matter. Rick had spotted it and it was then that we named Mt Tudor after him, in recognition of his keen sight. We needed a sample. The suggestion was put forward that we should dig up a plant the size of one of our empty cooler boxes and pack the plant around with its own soil, for shipping south in the aeroplane when we returned home.

I volunteered to go back to the camp and get a hand axe and the box, while the rest of the group fanned out to search for more plants. When I

returned half an hour later they had not found a single plant within quarter of a mile of our first find. This was it! The grass colony consisted of about 100 shaving brushes so we wondered if they were the last of their kind.

After a ceremony that included throwing our hats in the air and recording it on video film, we set about resurrecting Resurrection. We discovered that the plants were living in nine inches of sand over solid rock. We cut around what we considered to be the most handsome specimen, freed it from the rock, lifted it into the cooler box and then packed loose sand around the plant to steady it. The box weighed a ton, but many happy hands made light work of carrying it back to camp. What would we have done if we had found the grass four hours from camp? Thinking about carrying that weight all the way back from Agnes made us all shudder with horror; in fact we could never have done it. The day was declared a holiday and we all retired to the pool for lunch and the washing ritual of clothes and bodies.



That night, around the fire after more rice, beans and, for a treat, spam, we decided to tackle getting our precious cargo out of the valley and up the Jump Up the following day. We couldn't wait to get to a telephone to report the find of the century! With great ceremony we carved our initials, date and the words *CAMP BORYA*, in the bark of one of the trees that had given us such welcome shade.



In the morning we packed up and drove out. When we reached the escarpment it looked even more daunting than when we had looked back at it on our way in. The passengers got out and stationed themselves either side of the track ready to direct Nickie, who had volunteered to drive, as he would have no idea where his wheels were pointing, as he bounced up the escarpment, holding onto the wheel with all his might. The truck took off and I filmed its progress. Every time I watch that film I am overcome with tension, willing the truck from rock to rock. Sometimes you can see a foot of daylight between rock and tyre. Smoke poured out of the overhead exhaust as though the truck was a steam engine and gravel shot out from under the tyres like bullets, making the bystanders jump for cover. The engine roared and it almost sounded as though the truck was enjoying the challenge.

Peter was designated to drive the jeep and he flew up the track. I am sure the wheels were in the air much more than on the ground as being so light it literally leapt from rock to rock. We had made it and the Resurrection Grass had started its journey south. We followed our wheel marks out along the edge of the black soil plain and rounded the end of Mt Jameson, back to the track.

We had not gone far when Nickie yelled for us to stop as he had seen some eagles circling over the escarpment. He wanted to climb up to the rocks and see if he could find a nest. He and Alice set off while the rest of us took the opportunity to stretch our legs and have something to eat. We had just settled down in the shade of the truck when we heard an excited yell from above us. Nickie's voice travelled well as it bounced back off the cliff face, so we could easily make out what he was shouting. "Come up here. It is well worth the effort." What was he on about? He sounded excited so we all set off up the very steep hill muttering to ourselves that whatever he had found had better be worth the effort, it being well over 100 degrees already!

We arrived at the base of the cliff to find Nickie standing in the mouth of a giant rock shelter. On the wall of the shelter was a five-foot high Wandjina painting that looked like a cross between Mr Michelin and an astronaut. Grey-blue white in colour, it was an amazing find.

We took photographs and then climbed down to continue our journey, which was uneventful except for something that happened which, for me, has led to an obsession. We were again camped on the Hann River. We had been very fortunate as we had not had another puncture, the trucks had kept going and literally nothing had gone wrong. Next morning we would reach Mt Elizabeth Station and get back onto the main highway. Once there we planned to head up past Drysdale River Station to Kalumbaroo mission on the Timor Sea. Somewhere along that road we would find a sign that would direct us into the RTZ camp, where we would hand over our sand samples and be able to call the Herbarium in Melbourne. Mission accomplished!

So what was it that happened near the Hann River Crossing on the way out? I had been looking at the map and saw marked *Native Paintings* some quarter of a mile from the river. As we were well ahead of schedule with time to spare, I suggested that we stop and have a look. When we thought we were near the area marked on the map we slowed right down to a crawl. The dirt track swung in towards a sandstone cliff, a likely spot for rock shelters. So with walkers out in front we edged up to a canyon mouth. Leaving the trucks we climbed through the entrance to find a small hidden valley. I don't think I have ever

been in such a spooky place and I had a burning desire to turn and leave. The place reeked of death and I personally felt very uncomfortable.



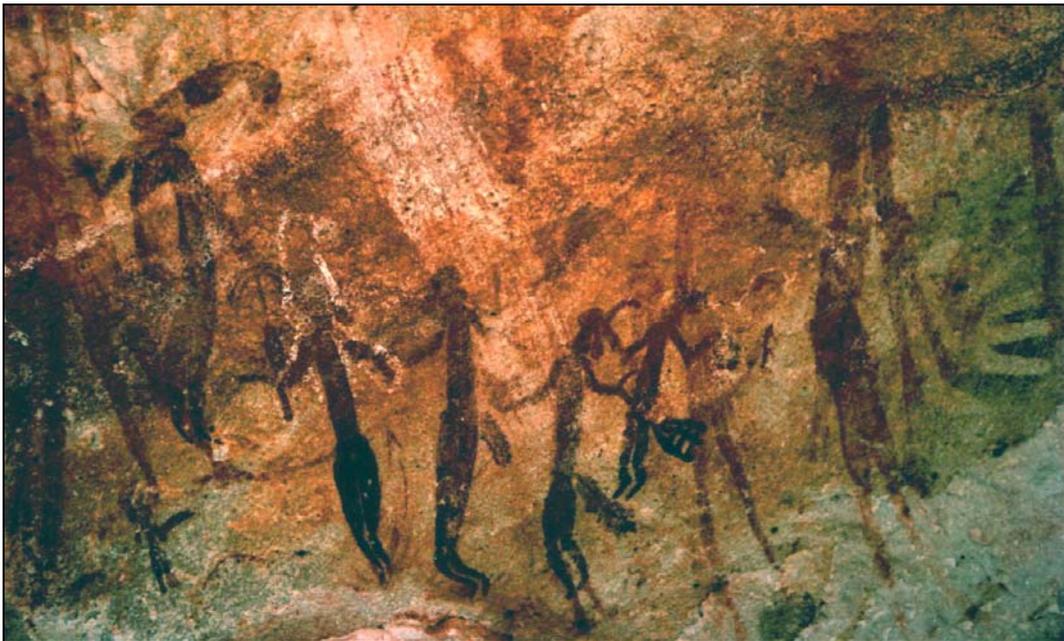
'Astronaut', Nickie's Wandjina

We had started to walk out when something drew our attention to an overhang on the right where we could see some lines on a rock surface. Could it be a painting? We climbed up onto the rocks that separated us from the shelter to look through the binoculars. There were paintings on the back wall!



Hann River canyon

The paintings were totally different to Wandjinas. They were tiny, a foot high and dark blood-red in colour and they were of people. One of the painted panels was very special.



A plumed headdress leader with Indian-file figures

An 18-inch long group showed a priest with a plumbed feather headdress leading four other figures in Indian file. Two dancers had bushy foxtails and the leader had one arm raised, and you could count his fingers! In the other hand he carried two boomerangs. Another of the dancers had a boomerang and yet another had what looked like a tennis racquet!

I was thrilled by the painting. These figures were totally unlike any Aborigine painting I had ever seen photographs of before. The action of the group raised the hairs on the back of my neck, because in some odd way they resembled our Indian file when we had found the Resurrection Grass.

We left the canyon and took a back-track that was marked on the map out to Gibb River Station where I had met Andreas Lommel and his wife, Katharina, with policeman, Buster Thorpe, 26 years before in 1955.

We arrived at the RTZ camp in the evening and used their showers, their clothes washer and drank their beer. It was a very welcome pit stop as they also mended our punctured tyre. Next morning Rick rang the Herbarium and reported our success to Dr Churchill, who was ecstatic.

Our trip north was fairly uneventful. We visited Kalumbaroo Mission and camped on the beach beside the Timor Sea where Peter and I couldn't resist having a wallow in the sea. We ploughed through the itchiest foot-deep bull dust to see where the George River plunged 300 feet over a cliff into an amazing sheer red-walled canyon. In the Wet the waterfall must be as spectacular as Niagara!



The canyon carved by the King George River

Alice had to return to Melbourne so we said goodbye to her at the camp and handed her the cooler box containing the sample of *Borya Subulata*, which

she safely delivered into Dr Churchill's very welcoming hands. The Herbarium divided the plant into several bits, placing one in a Rain Forest climate. Within a year the plant had started to send out aerial roots using DNA that had been dormant since the last Ice Age! Some time after we had arrived home Peter announced that he had a specimen of dried Borya in his luggage so I had it framed and it now sits in his study as a reminder of an amazing experience.

Some years later I met the wife of the Master of Jesus College, Cambridge, Lady Renfrew, and discovered that she connected to Kew Gardens in London. I told her about the specimen we had brought home and she asked me to send it to Kew so that they could have a look. They took a 3-D photograph for their records, but we refused to allow them to keep our souvenir. If they want a specimen Peter is quite willing to get one for them at their expense!

Our trip had been fun and we had seen marvellous things including a great panel of Wandjina serpents on King Edward Station, but nothing compared to our time at Agnes, which will for ever be one of the highlights of my life. Resurrection Grass, Agnes and the mysterious Hann River paintings, they had all been quite incredible.

Peter returned to England and started his Geology course at Durham University and Alice became a vet. Nickie went on to become one of Australia's leading Natural History photographers, Chris, a schoolmaster in Alice Springs and Rick, the headmaster of Trinity College in Melbourne, one of Australia's great centres of education. Before going home to England I flew to Canberra to meet up with Margie and Ron Beaver for the unveiling of *Eternity*.

On the way home to England I thought about the little dancing paintings. Little did I know that they would lead me to a whole new world!

