



Still Morning—Tonnali Tableland

BURRAGORANG An Artist's Journey

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My first introduction to the Burragorang Valley came in 1973 when I was escorted into Yerranderrie by two rangers who worked for the Metropolitan Water Sewerage and Drainage Board, as Water NSW was then known. My visit had been arranged by the Chief Forestry Officer who had become a friend through a local art group.

Yerranderrie was a ghost town at that time and very few people were able to visit due to its difficult location. Access was through a series of locked gates in the Wollondilly area, or via Oberon on a very rough gravel road. It had been a thriving silver mining town before being cut off by the rising waters of Lake Burragorang. Yerranderrie in 1973 had many fascinating abandoned dilapidated houses and while I very much enjoyed the exploration of such a deserted and interesting place it was to be another eight years before circumstances led me to visit the area again.

By this time I was well into a painting career and had explored many different subjects but I was looking for new subject matter and was restless and lacking direction. As fate would have it I was again able to secure a trip into the catchment area of the Burragorang Valley, simply for a visit. This valley, so close to Sydney, was once a thriving farming and holiday destination. Its beauty and location brought visitors from Sydney to ride, fish and bushwalk, staying in one of the many guest houses in the area.

All this would come to an end during the 1950s. There had been plans for a permanent water supply for Sydney since the 1940s and so it was decided that the dam wall would be built and the Burragorang Valley flooded. Despite protests farms and homes were acquired and residents of the valley were forced to leave. The building of the dam wall began in 1948 at Warragamba and was completed in

1960. Waters backed up and rose quickly and by 1958 most people who had lived there had left.

As an artist I knew the valley through many of the great painters such as Rubery Bennet who had painted the area regularly. I had always been interested in the lost beauty of the place and assumed that there was nothing much left after it had been engulfed by the floodwaters. I was surprised to discover that not all had been lost. Towering mountain walls, decaying houses, river flats, gravel roads and much beauty remained untouched. I saw the potential for many paintings and the new direction with my art I so badly needed.

This was to be the beginning of a long association with the Burragorang Valley and I was allowed in many times to paint this fairly inaccessible area. In the 1980s I was



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Wanganderry Walls at Sunset

commissioned by the Water Board to produce a series of paintings of the valley and some of their other catchment areas such as Cordeaux. Many were purchased and some still remain with the Water Board today—hung in the Board's offices and some reproduced as Water Board Christmas cards. Over several years, accompanied by the Board's rangers, I travelled widely throughout the catchment area and completed more than 100 paintings of the Burragorang Valley and Kedumba which were

sold in exhibitions in 1981 and 1985— Burragorang: The Forgotten Valley and Burragorang Re-Visited.

Life is ever fluctuating and the Water Board began moving in a different direction. Towards the end of the 1980s older employees were retiring and the internal structure was changing. Contacts I once had were lost and I decided it was time to move on to paint different aspects of the landscape. I took up bushwalking and

developed a name as a wilderness artist travelling all over Australia. I almost forgot about Burragorang—it remained just a distant memory for close to 30 years.

As fate would have it, I met Jim Smith at an exhibition I had in 2014. Jim Smith is a highly regarded historian who, through our mutual interest, invited me to look over his many Burragorang photographs. Jim was then writing a book—'The Aboriginal People of the Burragorang

Valley'—and my interest was re-kindled and the idea for a third and final exhibition as well as the publication of a book was born. These projects involved renewed access requiring permission from the body that is now Water NSW. It took two years and many difficulties before finally Jim, myself and an aboriginal girl, Taylor—a descendant of the Gundungarra people who had lived in the valley—managed to secure a series of visits between 2015 and 2016.

My next exhibition 'Burragorang: The Lost Valley'—the final one of this area—will consist of 40 paintings depicting my almost life-long love affair with this valley, its never changing beauty, yet its ever evolving landscape, and will be held in March next year at the Lost Bear Gallery, Lurline Street, Katoomba. Coinciding with the launch will be the publication of the book of my paintings of this special place entitled 'Burragorang: The Lost Valley', possibly the only book to show the Burragorang Valley through the eyes of an artist.

This amazing place that I have had the privilege to know over so many years, is now impossible to visit. My hope is that I am able to leave a visual legacy of the Burragorang Valley through my paintings and my book.

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Above:
Robyn with
Paddy's Peak in
the background

Left:
The Crossing
at the Old
Homestead —
Kedumba Creek