

Sunlander to Cairns: Part One

- a narrative by Lyle A Stacpoole

Well I am going! It was with great expectations that when I got my pension 4 years ago I could take free *train trips in Queensland*.

You see I have been a train addict since I could read and I had a book on trains when very young. I enjoy train travel, there is a sense of freedom that you do not get with other public transport. But it has taken me a while to jump on the train to Cairns, something I had promised myself that 48 months ago. I got a sleeper, a single one as I am not good at sharing small spaces, and I am nicely tucked away by myself now in solitude while I watch the first part of the journey slide past. It is warm and cloudy as we leave Caboolture and we wind past familiar places I know well. "The Simpsons' movie is starting in about 5 minutes in the club car" announces the conductor over the sound system; sounds like I will not be going to the club car for a couple of hours then.

Ah! The first of a series of tunnels near Mooloolah, and now we cross the Mooloolah River so we are starting the ascent towards the Eudlo Range. This is one of the nicest drives around the Sunshine Coast, a back-road that runs between Mooloolah and Eudlo over the top of a range that is quite rugged. We follow the general direction of the road I know well and enter the main tunnel on the range and the conductor reminds me of the menu on offer for lunch. Like a long carpet snake the train winds through the curves as it eases onward towards the summit through the trees that are quite thick in this area, reminding me that we are in the sub-tropics after all. At least out here away from the metropolis of the modern and busy Sunshine Coast you get that feeling of denseness of a sub-tropical forest.

We pull into Nambour and typically it is raining. But Nambour is beautiful when it is like this, with the surrounding hills covered in mist and trees, certainly better than when it is hot and those hills capture the heat within their walls. It can then be unbearably humid without any breeze, until at least the sea breezes come up the Bli Bli valley, generally by mid morning till late afternoon. I am reminded of many early mornings on the job painting or building houses and I wonder what my 'brown house' up on Panorama Drive looks like now. It was dubbed that by our son who was born when we lived there. It was on the hilly side of Panorama Drive and with the 'Hurricane' already proving to be an explorer we had decided to move before he rolled down the hill, like the way he rolled down the stairway when he was just 4 months and crawling everywhere to all corners of our small home and beyond if he could. I was very proud of that house, I suppose you always are of your first one, but the combination of flush laid motley red and gold bricks and Western Red Cedar, thus the nickname, made it look like a Scandinavian cottage. We had a 'pet' possum, a resident 6 foot goanna and bird life that made my photographer brother-in-law Glenn drool when he visited. I had made these beautiful Kalantis timber French doors, a set of four leading from the lounge room and another two from the main upstairs bedroom out onto a beautiful verandah that was virtually in the tree tops.

Yes Nambour is beautiful in the rain! Quietly the train slips out of the station and we make our way through more of the lush greenery of the sub-tropical rainforests north from Nambour towards Yandini. We cross the Maroochy River and make our way into the ranges north of Eumundi. From here there are a lot of cuttings of shale limestone and sandstone and in between them glorious panoramas of green valleys and cattle grazing the Noosa Hinterland. I want the train to stop because there are views just reaching out to be photographed, but there

is a minimum \$10 fine for pulling the emergency brake, upward of \$3000, so I could rack up a bit of a bill for every time I wanted to do it. There has been a bit of rain lately and there are pools of water alongside the railway tracks and the grass is everywhere green. Just north of the small town of Tiaro we cross the broad expanse of the Mary River. By now the clouds have cleared and as we near Maryborough the sun is going down.

It has now been nearly 4 hours since we left Caboolture but it does not seem to have been that long. Only twenty five to go to get to Cairns. I am starting to feel it is a pity the sun is going down as that means the scenery will soon be engulfed in darkness and it will be up to the onboard entertainment to whittle away a few more hours before I settle down for a sleep later. I will set the alarm for sun-up as I have not seen this countryside much and by morning I will certainly be in completely new territory for me. We are slowing down and nearby the advertising sign for a new housing estate indicates we are getting close to Maryborough. We pull into the station and outside cheerful people are greeted by friends and relatives. Railway stations seem to be the friendliest places because people are always pleased to meet other people. Laughter, presents and hugs seem to be the order of the day. But there are also the people who get off the train and are alone and I remember that I did not order a taxi for when I get to Cairns. Arriving at seven o'clock on a Friday night I am thinking that is not smart move.

Dinner is starting to be served and I am feeling a bit peckish by now. I will wander down and see if the footy is going to be on the TV somewhere later in the evening. Before I realize it the train is starting to gather speed and we are on our way again. Okay, this a good time to go for a walk and see what is on the train because it is now quite dark outside. I will see this coming home again anyway and it will be during the middle of the day and thus will make the return trip somewhat interesting. There is so much you see from the train route when it ventures away from the main highway more often travelled.

Well I would like you to know Mr. Wilson that it is 4-55 AM and I am clocking in for the day, do I get overtime? Undertime? I have had a reasonable sleep plus my morning shower and the full moon, well almost full, is still in the western sky. It is still half dark so I cannot see much yet but through the night the ride was awesome. If you ever do this trip, well what I mean is WHEN you do this trip, try and do it close to a full moon; you get to see the scenery at night in this eerie moonlit shadow. When there is nothing to see because of the open plains, you seem to see more. The trees stand out like beacons and some of their shapes in the moonlight can be a unique picture. I was woken up as we pulled into Gladstone and again as we approached Rockhampton Station; I do not know quite where we are now but we are coming into a township, not many lights so it is either a small town or still just the outskirts. A couple of large industrial buildings are coming into view so it might be a large town. Talk about large, it seemed we had been going through Rocky for ages then suddenly we were crossing the Fitzroy River and we were only half way through the city. I have just been told by a gentleman getting off here that we are at MacKay. There is a long row of cement haulers across on another line and the view is disrupted by three locos as they drag a seemingly endless row of freight cars slowly past beside us.

So I have had a reasonable sleep, the bed was certainly comfortable; it is always the same with me though, if I am moving I have to see where I am and where I am going, so even in the moonlight I end up watching the scenery most of the night. I had caught up on the footy scores earlier in the evening; Geelong the AFL PREMIERS were playing Port Adelaide in Adelaide. The televisions on the train are only for showing videos hence I was a bit disappointed so I came back to my room and switched on Big Pond on my mobile to at least follow the scores and thankfully I have a strong signal. It was half way through the second

quarter and Geelong were 5 goals in front. It stayed that way till the eleven minute mark of the last when Port got back to 25 points down, just four goals now. Two minutes later and the difference is 3 goals. 'What is going on down there at AAMI stadium?' I was thinking. Then I remembered. It is likely blowing a gale and Port are kicking with it in the last. It is now the 21st minute and Geelong have not entered their forward fifty for over ten minutes. WHAT! Okay so they kick a couple in a row; that should give them some breathing space. We pull out of Gladstone, of the Queensland variety, but my mind is far away in Adelaide, a city I know very well. 'It is blowing a gale for sure' and I am thinking 'Port are going to come home and win this'. CARN GEELONG! Port were the last team to beat Geelong, breaking Geelong's winning streak at the end of the regular season before Geelong eventually thrashed them by a record margin in the Grand Final. But that was now six months ago and this is a new season. Everyone talks down the first game of the new year but if you lose you are still in the bottom half of the ladder and NO-ONE likes being there, even if just for Round One. Geelong again have not entered their forward fifty for five minutes. The time ticks over to 30 minutes and 28 seconds gone and while it is dark outside I hear that Geelong are now just 9 points up. But it surely is nearly over NOW! 25 minutes plus time-on! But a team can still kick 2 goals in 30 seconds so if there is still a minute in it they could still lose. I refresh the screen, still reads 30:28. Could that be it? Has Geelong hung on to win? We have pulled well out of Gladstone by now and we are rattling along at a rate of knots. HAS GEELONG WON? I refresh the screen again, it still reads 30:28. Thank goodness I think they have hung on. Whew.

Okay, so now I can start the new day in a great frame of mind. We are on the move again, I have had some sleep and Geelong won last night. I will look forward to seeing the replay when I get to Cairns and plug into the Internet in my room at Trinity Gardens Resort.

Meanwhile back in MacKay the station is on the other side of the train and again I cannot see what is happening on it. Did my 'friend' have someone to meet him? I am starting to feel hungry and wonder how long before the buffet car opens for brekkie. The meal I had last night was pretty good, I had the steak which was cooked just as I ordered and the potatoes were very nice thank you very much. And not too expensive either! I must say that whenever I have travelled by train they DO feed you well at a good price, so I am now looking forward to breakfast. It is nearly 5:40 so I might take the laptop down and see if I can keep working there in the dining car, I will be able to see the sun come up from there as well.

The crew are working in the galley getting my first meal of the day ready, the same team that were there last night so they have had a long ride as well. It is still lighter in the western sky than in the east as the cloudless sky there reveals the last reflections from the moon, while in the east there appears to be rain-clouds hiding any effort the sun may be making to influence the new day. The famous Mackay sugar-cane farms come into view and as we seem to be approaching a range there is quite a mountain just to the east of the track and now we are pushing our way through a cutting in the hills. Out the other side and the road sign tells me its south to MacKay and north to Proserpine. The cane farms from the other side of the range have given way to forest here, nope, that did not last long, more cane farms again, and here they take up the whole valley. Another mountain on the right is enshrouded in early morning cloud as the cane fields start to turn green with the gathering light. By the time the sun gets above the horizon the clouds have cleared as if by request of the new day.

Well that was pretty 'orright'. Had an early morning cuppa tea and muffin and later brekkie with some cereal, yoghurt and then bacon and eggs with Jake the resident muso, Bill and Kev. That is the great part of train travel, meeting people from all walks of life and areas of Australia and just sharing stories and experiences.

We are currently sitting in the middle of a paddock that is the Bowen Railway Station. The township of Bowen appears to be over to the east with the rail a little way out of town. The scenery along here is strangely similar to south east Queensland still, especially at the moment when everything everywhere is green. There is the savannah type scrub and that touch of arid Australia mixed with the lush green semi-tropical grasses and pandanus palms.

We get to Townsville about 12 noon and stop for 25 minutes which I thought was about 24.5 minutes too long given we still have quite a fair way to go. I did get and stretch my legs though which was refreshing however it is a pity we do not see more of the picturesque side of this colourful town with all its history. Unfortunately our view of Magnetic Island is hampered by the city sky-line but Castle Hill stands out close to the east of the tracks. I have been on the train now for 22 hours with another 7 to go so still have a bit to look forward to. The hills and ranges are gradually getting higher and closer nevertheless they still have that strange mystic blue colour that is the feature of the *Australian Great Dividing Range*.

The remains of a flood from three weeks ago is starting to show as we get further north close to Ingham and it is quite noticeable with the water still reasonably high. We cross the Seymour River, flanked by more sugar cane farms which stretch for miles in all directions, all the way to the mountain range which now rises prominently out of the plains in the west. The Seymour winds back around and we cross it again, and suddenly we are among more tropical forest and the little waterways that are everywhere are all full of water. We are now well and truly surrounded by high mountains which are tropical green and the undergrowth has changed from simply green grass to small shrubs and palms. The main road is only 20 metres away to our right and the ocean only another 100 metres beyond that, but both are almost invisible through the thick tropical growth. Large granite boulders scatter the sides of the railway line, some up to seven or eight feet across.

We must be now getting closer to Tully as we see the first banana stools since Nambour. Sugar cane is still the predominant farming and it is now up to six or seven feet tall around here. The water in the creeks and streams is running swiftly, like genuine mountain streams, gurgling over the rocks and sand of the wide shallow creek-beds. The remnants of recent flooding are scattered along the creeks and even along the side of the railway tracks and any low areas are still drenched in water.

Well I feel it now; the tropics. We stopped at Tully and the short walk back up the platform from the Club Car to my vestibule was hot. Hot and decipherably humid. Ten kilometers north of Tully we pass through a range that exudes the tropics; with green pines and tropical cedars overgrown with ivies, moss and hyacinth. Palms are now everywhere and the hills are now simply green, not blue, and the sun is shining on green; lush tropical green. Well at least it LOOKS cool, even if it is not.

"Fair dinkum mon! You are going to Cairns for eight days, you had better get used to it" replies Jake my new muso mate as I venture to mention that it reminds me of getting off the plane in Fiji. Yep, not much chance of me staying much longer either, no matter how nice it looks. But it DOES look nice, really worth the trip, and getting up close and 'personal' with it on the train is the perfect way to see it; at least it is from an air-conditioned rail coach.

The ranges are recognisably much higher and greener now, shrouded in afternoon mist even though there are only a few clouds elsewhere in a mostly blue sky. The rivers are more frequent and wider; clear water rushing down from the mountains amidst the tall green sugar cane fields that flood the valley floor. It is dark as we pull into Cairns Central Station and what has been an exhilarating journey comes to an end. Apart from a short taxi ride to Trinity Beach twenty minutes north of the city. AH! A good nights sleep awaits!